Gaps in Identification and Support for Students Experiencing Homelessness and Housing Instability in Detroit

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Abstract

Homelessness and housing instability can have significant negative effects on students'

academic and behavioral outcomes. Schools that endeavor to support students who are

experiencing housing instability can only do so if they accurately identify students facing these

challenges. This mixed-methods study provides deep, contextualized data on the experiences of

housing unstable youth and families in Detroit traditional public and charter schools, whether

and how they are identified as housing unstable by their districts, and what schools are doing to

support them. We find that 16% of Detroit students were housing unstable in 2021-22, but

Detroit schools only identified 4% of students as homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act. Our

qualitative data suggest that this undercount is predominantly related to parents' feelings of

stigma and shame associated with discussing their situation with their schools and in some cases

a lack of follow-through when parents do divulge their housing issue. Housing unstable students

who were not identified by their districts as such were more likely to have been suspended;

identification was not associated with attendance or student mobility, compared to other housing

unstable students.

Gaps in Identification and Support for Students Experiencing Homelessness and Housing Instability in Detroit

Homelessness and housing instability have negative effects on students' educational opportunities and outcomes. Students experiencing homelessness almost always face other economic disadvantages such as poverty, are more disproportionately racially minoritized students, and more often reside and go to school in higher-poverty and racially segregated contexts (Buckner, 2008; Cowen, 2017; Dhaliwal et al., 2021). Academically, they tend to score lower on math and English/language arts tests than their peers (Cowen, 2017; De Gregorio et al., 2022). They are also more likely to be chronically absent, more likely to change schools or districts between school years, are more often suspended from school, and face greater barriers to navigating school choice systems (Cowen, 2017; Erb-Downward, 2018; Erb-Downward & Watt, 2018; Sattin-Bajaj & Jennings, 2022).

Schools can help students experiencing homelessness by identifying their needs and providing resources (Dhaliwal & De Gregorio, 2022). Some research has found homeless students' academic outcomes stabilize after the first year that they are identified in district administrative data, suggesting that resources and supports provided to these students and their families may mitigate some of the detrimental effects of homelessness (De Gregorio et al., 2022). Yet, schools face administration, coordination, and capacity challenges when it comes to identifying students experiencing homelessness and providing social and economic supports for them (Shapiro, 2022). In addition, families can be reluctant to disclose housing instability to schools because of shame or fear of Child Protective Services involvement (Ausikaitis et al., 2015).

The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act outlines how schools should identify and support students experiencing homelessness. Students are considered to be homeless

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). Schools must identify students who meet this definition, and every district must have a liaison that oversees identification and support. As it pertains to identification, the district liaison typically works with school staff to ensure all are educated about the homeless definition and that there is an identification process in place—typically in the form of housing questionnaire that families respond to when enrolling in school or in a new grade level.

Under the McKinney-Vento Act, schools must also ensure that unstably housed students have the "full and equal opportunity" to succeed in school—a mandate that schools typically comply with by removing barriers to school enrollment, stability and transportation. For example, students experiencing homelessness must be enrolled by schools even if they lack the proper paperwork (e.g., immunization records) or have missed relevant district deadlines. These students are also able to stay in their school of origin even if they move outside the school attendance boundaries while homeless or until the end of the academic year in cases where they obtain permanent housing. While attending their school of origin, the district must also provide transportation for students so that they can continue attending school even if they have had to move farther away. Aside from these provisions, district liaisons also offer support to homeless families and their students by connecting them with services (e.g., shelters, health), providing school supplies, and removing barriers for extracurricular programs (e.g., providing fee waivers).

The purpose of this study is to further describe the challenges faced by unstably housed students and their families, provide insight into the challenges and successes schools have had in identifying and supporting them, and identify whether students who are identified as homeless

(and eligible for McKinney-Vento services) experience different school outcomes than students who are unstably housed but not identified as such by their schools. Our goal is to inform improvements in school and district practices to better support unstably housed students and their families. We conducted mixed methods research on students experiencing homelessness and housing crises in Detroit. The challenges of serving unstably housed students are particularly salient in Detroit, where researchers have estimated only 10-15% of students experiencing homelessness are identified by districts each year (Erb-Downward et al., 2021). We ask the following research questions:

1. What challenges do homelessness and housing instability create for Detroit students, and to what extent do schools offer support to mitigate those challenges?

2. To what extent are unstably housed students identified as such by their districts, and how do relationships and interactions between families and schools help explain the gap?

3. How do educational experiences and outcomes differ between those who are and are not identified?

Literature Review

Housing Instability

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Detroit landlords filed about 30,000 eviction cases annually, impacting the equivalent of roughly 1 in 5 renter households (Eisenberg & Brantley, 2022a). These widespread evictions exist in the context of a city struggling to provide quality, affordable housing to all of its residents, making it difficult for Detroiters to find housing again once it has been lost. Only 10% of the city's rental properties had a valid certificate of compliance as of July 2022 (Eisenberg & Brantley, 2022b), and nearly 38,000 households were believed to be

living in inadequate housing in 2021 (Wileden, 2021). This places Detroit's children at risk of experiencing homelessness and has significant educational implications.

As many as 14,000 school-age children in Detroit are estimated to have been homeless at some point in the 2017-2018 school year (Erb-Downward et al., 2021). These students face unique educational challenges that extend beyond those of children struggling with poverty alone. Families may be missing important documents required for school enrollment, and loss of housing often disrupts access to the transportation and social networks that families rely on to get to school. This results in delays in school enrollment, frequent school absences, and mid-year school transfers (Bowman & Barksdale, 2004; Erb-Downward et al., 2021). These threats to educational continuity are associated with higher rates of grade retention and lower academic achievement (Rafferty et al., 2004; Rafferty & Rollins, 1989), as well as difficulty making friends, lack of familiarity with curriculum, and limited engagement in extracurricular activities (Tierney et al., 2008). Separation from their neighborhoods, friends, and family members also places strain on children and is associated with poorer emotional well-being and educational attainment (Anooshian, 2003). These challenges come at a time when family norms and routines have often been disrupted by the loss of housing, removing factors known to be protective for youth and families amidst extreme stress (Mayberry et al., 2014).

While the McKinney-Vento Act is designed to address many of these additional barriers through transportation, enrollment, and other educational supports, children experiencing homelessness in Detroit often go unidentified by their schools. Estimates place the percentage of school-aged children in Detroit experiencing homelessness to be between 14% and 16% (Erb-Downward & Merchant, 2020; Koschmann et al., 2002), but only around 2% of students were identified by their school districts as experiencing homelessness in the 2017-2018 school year

(Erb-Downward et al., 2021). This means that children and families experiencing homelessness often face the challenges of unstable housing without the educational supports to which they are legally entitled.

To better understand the external factors impacting children educationally, researchers have sought to distinguish between the experiences of homeless youth and housed low-income youth. Although there are overlapping risk factors associated with economic disadvantage, students experiencing homelessness fall on the high end of a continuum of risk (Masten et al., 1993; Obradovic et al., 2009). The dual impact of poverty and housing instability has been connected to a range of poor outcomes for youth's physical health, cognitive and social development, emotional well-being, and academic achievement (Edidin et al., 2021; Weinreb et al., 1998). Studies also suggest that homeless youth face a greater risk of exposure to trauma than their peers, beyond just the loss of housing. Adults who experienced homelessness in childhood were likely to experience multiple adverse childhood experiences (Radcliff et al., 2019). Among Detroit youth in middle and high school, students who reported experiencing homelessness not only had above-average rates of depression and anxiety, but they were also most likely to report exposure to four or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) among surveyed students (Koschmann et al., 2022).

Educational Outcomes of Unstably Housed Youth

Existing studies have shown that homelessness is associated with negative consequences for educational outcomes, including achievement, attendance and discipline. The preponderance of research shows that homeless students exhibit lower reading and math proficiency (DeGregorio et al., 2022; Cowen, 2017; J. Fantuzzo et al., 2013; J. W. Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Masten et al., 2012; Perlman et al., 2010; Pavlakis et al., 2017), and lower math achievement growth (Cutuli et al.,

2013), even after accounting for other important differences between students who are and who are not homeless. These students are also more likely to be expelled or suspended from school (Erb-Downward & Blakeslee, 2021) and engage in risky behaviors (Bantchevska et al., 2008; Greene et al., 1997; Oppong Asante et al., 2016). They also attend fewer days of school and are more likely to change schools (i.e., school mobility) (Cowen, 2017; Deck, 2017; Dhaliwal et al., 2021; J. W. Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Larson & Meehan, 2011; Miller & Bourgeois, 2013). Attendance, mobility, and school discipline are also important mediators for academic achievement. For example, studies have found that attendance and mobility mediate the academic impacts of being homeless with lower attendance and increased school mobility contributing to lower academic achievement (Cowen, 2017; J. W. Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Tobin, 2016). Suspensions and expulsions might also relate to academic achievement, as is the case with general population students where exclusionary discipline is associated with negative impacts on achievement (e.g., Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018).

Aside from the role of attendance, mobility and discipline, there are other mechanisms and potential mediators that could explain why the educational outcomes of students experiencing homelessness might suffer. Social isolation, stigma and poor socio-emotional health are all likely reasons why homelessness is linked to poorer educational outcomes. For example, students experiencing homelessness are more likely to be socially and psychologically isolated in schools (Anooshian, 2003; Chow et al., 2015, Fantuzzo et al., 2012), including having difficulty in developing and maintaining peer relationships, withdrawing socially, and engaging in externalizing behaviors (e.g., being aggressive, noncompliant). Some of this isolation might also stem from the literal separation of parents, children, and other family members caused by housing loss (Cowal et al., 2002; MacLean et al., 1999; Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007; MacLean et al., 1999;

Zlotnick et al., 1999). Perhaps in part due to isolation, students experiencing homelessness are more likely to experience depression and anxiety than their stably housed peers (Samuels et al., 2010).

Feelings of isolation and impaired socio-emotional development are likely compounded by school mobility and the disruptions to social relationships that accompany a school move for this highly mobile group. The rupturing of social relationships with peers and teachers means that students lose important connections that take time to recreate in their new school sites (Welsh, 2017). Additionally, the stigma of being homeless might also push students to withdraw from social relationships. Tierney and Hallett (2010, 2012) found that feelings of shame and embarrassment prevented older homeless youth from opening up to teachers and peers, likely contributing to the social isolation felt by these students.

Difficulty Identifying Unstably Housed Youth

Due to discrepancies in administrative record keeping and shame with self-reporting, schools struggle to identify their homeless student population (Levin et al., 2022; Edwards, 2019, 2020). At a federal level, definitions of homelessness vary (Lowell & Hanratty, 2022; Hallberg et al., 2021). The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has three categories defining the "literally homeless" which include: those who are living in a place not meant for human inhabitation; those who are living in shelters or transitional housing; and those who are living in hotels or motels that are subsidized by charities or government organizations (Levin et al., 2022). Conversely, the Department of Education defines homeless students as "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" which includes children living doubled up; the HUD definition does not include students living in doubled-up or inadequate residences (Morton et al., 2017; Levin et al., 2021; Hallberg et al., 2022; Lowell & Hanratty, 2022).

These distinctions matter, as almost 60% of the youth identified as homeless nationwide by their school sites for the McKinney-Vento Act live doubled-up; this is compared to the 24% living in shelters, the 7% living in hotels or motels, and the 3% who are totally unsheltered (Hallett, 2012). This means that variation in how organizations or schools define homelessness may immediately count out large sections of housing unstable students.

These conflicting definitions continue at the state and local levels, with what defines a child as housing unstable varying from district to district (The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2012) and methods of tracking varying from school to school (Levin et al., 2022). In a 2021 review of student homelessness in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), Dhaliwal et al. (2021) noted that students were asked to fill out questionnaires about their nighttime residence at the beginning of the school year. Along with this questionnaire, each school had a trained homeless liaison and an accountability process through the California Department of Education. LAUSD only identified 3.3% of its students as homeless, whereas identification was higher in the metro LA area (4.7%), Chicago metro area (4.7%), and in NYC (9.8%). Dhaliwal et al. (2021) also found that these discrepancies are likely due to how well students were identified within their own data sets.

One of the issues with self-reporting at an individual level is that parents and students may fear the involvement of CPS or judgments from the school (Ausikaitis et al., 2015; Edwards, 2019; Edwards, 2020; Levin et al., 2022). In Edwards' (2020) qualitative study of Black homeless youth in Los Angeles, one of his participants feared that her school would respond to her housing instability by reporting her family to CPS. Another Black student, having already experienced racial discrimination resulting in excessive removal from his school, feared how the knowledge of his homelessness could make the negative attention worse. This student's fears were substantiated

by Erb-Downward & Blakeslee (2021), who found that low income and housing unstable students experience exclusionary disciplinary action (e.g., suspensions and expulsions) at a 16% rate; this is compared to students who were economically disadvantaged but housed, with 11% experiencing disciplinary actions, and to the 4% of students who were housed and not economically disadvantaged.

Issues with underreporting unhoused students are present in both charter and public schools. A 2021 policy report by the University of Michigan's Poverty Solutions found that only 2% of all youth experiencing homelessness were identified by the Detroit Public Community Schools District and local charters. Comparatively, the City of Detroit reported that 16% of local children under the ages of 18 were experiencing housing instability. The report suggested that "as many as 14,000 school-age children in Detroit were homeless in SY 2017-18 alone and that up to 88% of those children were not identified as homeless by their school" (Erb-Downward et al., 2021, p. 10).

Aside from reporting, schools also struggle to get resources to their known homeless student population. Within the Chicago Public School system, Aviles (2019) spent a year observing, interviewing, and collecting fieldnotes inside two high schools for her qualitative study. Both schools had their own designated homelessness liaisons, but their effectiveness varied widely due to their own lack of training or attendance. In one school, the homeless liaison was absent two to three days a week, which significantly and repeatedly restricted access to time-sensitive resources for homeless youth. In the other school, despite being physically present, the attendance agent lacked thorough training and was often being pulled in multiple directions and being used as support staff throughout the building.

Overextended homeless liaisons were an issue even within school districts that were both successful in identifying and helping their housing unstable student populations. (Levin et al., 2022). When looking across school districts and the organizations they work with, Levin et al. were unable to definitively estimate how many support staff were dedicated to housing unstable students in each school. This was impacted by the breadth of support tasks that fell under the umbrella of the homeless liaison's duties; however, the larger student populations or schools with higher percentages of students experiencing homelessness did not have more support staff. Because of this, Levin et al. were unable to arrive at concise numbers for homelessness support staff positions as "there [were] so many individuals in the district office, school, and community organizations involved in meeting different aspects of students' needs while they also manage the needs of other students." (p. 24).

Additionally, these individuals varied between part- and full-time positions, sharing different tasks and duties across outside organizations to help homeless youth. These duties included: creating transportation plans for students, training school staff, outreach to build community relationships, identifying both student and family needs, and then connecting them to resources. The schools that built relationships with outside organizations were able to provide a wider network of aid, but these connections also took time and more resources to build.

School Support for Unstably Housed Youth and Families

The schools that were most successful in identifying and supporting their housing unstable students used a multi-pronged approach (Hallberg et al., 2021; Levin et al., 2022). In Hallberg et al.'s (2021) analysis of Chicago schools, they were able to identify thirty schools where housing unstable students had better academic outcomes than unstably housed students within surrounding schools. Through interviewing staff at twenty-one of these thirty schools that seemed to be better

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at supporting unhoused students, the authors found seven common strategies. These strategies involved destigmatizing homelessness and housing instability within the school amongst students and staff; building one-on-one relationships with homeless students; having continued and close monitoring of homeless students extending outside of school hours; providing basic daily needs like toiletry kits and clean laundry; connecting parents and families with opportunities for economic stability; making the school a "lighthouse" of the community by creating community partnerships; and creating the right in-school point person to serve as the homelessness liaison.

Levin et al. (2021) conducted a similar report from a national level; they selected five schools receiving McKinney-Vento funds that had been recognized for their ability to address the needs of their homeless student population (2021). The actions of the five exemplary school districts surveyed by Levin et al. (2021) mirrored and overlapped those from Hallberg et al.'s (2021) report. Levin et al. found that the most successful schools continuously educated their staff; they established community connections with different charities and organizations; and they made direct outreach to families in need instead of waiting for them to reach out. The schools also participated in public education campaigns to raise awareness about McKinney-Vento and available resources. Finally, they provided basic daily necessities, transportation, academic supports, physical and mental health supports, specialized supports for unaccompanied youth, and supports for families.

This study contributes to the existing literature by richly describing the complex challenges of youth and families experiencing housing instability in Detroit, providing nuance to the complications of identifying housing instability in school, and highlighting how schools can either exacerbate or ameliorate the difficulties of housing instability on educational outcomes.

Methodology

We used a multiphase mixed-methods research design for this study (Hewitt & Mansfield, 2020). We first collected data through a representative survey of Detroit students, and linked survey responses to student-level administrative data provided by districts. Then, we conducted in-depth follow-up interviews with parents of students who indicated that they were homeless or housing unstable at the time of the survey. In the first phase of our analysis, we took a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach, examining the circumstances and experiences of students experiencing homelessness or housing instability in our survey and interview data. In the second phase of our analysis, we took a sequential mixed-methods approach, first examining the gap between self-reported and district-identified homelessness and then using interview data to understand the factors that hinder identification. In our final phase of analysis, we used quantitative methods to estimate the association being identified as homeless and student outcomes among students experiencing homelessness and housing instability. In the following sections, we detail our collection and analysis of these quantitative and qualitative data.

Quantitative Data and Analysis

In January 2022, we conducted a representative survey of Detroit students in the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) and Detroit charter schools. Using district-provided rosters, we conducted a stratified random sample of DPSCD and charter students and invited their parents by text message and email to complete the survey online. (See Appendix A for additional details on the survey methodology.) On the survey, we asked families to report their current housing situation—whether they were currently homeowners, renters, living with a family member or friend (i.e., "doubled up"), or living in another situation (e.g., a shelter, a public place, moving from place to place)—and we asked whether they had experienced an eviction or were otherwise forced to leave their housing situation during the 2021 calendar year. For respondents who reported

living with a family member or friend, in line with the criteria for homelessness in the McKinney-Vento Act, we also asked if their current housing circumstances were (a) temporary or permanent and (b) adequate or inadequate. We also asked a range of questions about current socioeconomic circumstances, access to transportation, and school mobility.

We were able to link the survey data to administrative data from the students' districts. The administrative data, provided in June and July 2022 (at the end of the school year), include an indicator of whether a student was homeless, which allowed us to observe whether a homeless student was or was not identified by their district. The district-provided data also included demographic indicators for students (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity), the number of days each student was present and absent from school, and the number of out-of-school suspensions (OSS) each student received. From those data, we calculated students' attendance rate (i.e., days present out of total days), and created indicators for whether they were chronically absent (i.e., missed 10% of more of total school days) and whether they ever received an OSS.

We identified students as homeless or housing unstable based on multiple datapoints First, using our January 2022 survey data, we identified students as homeless if they were doubled up and reported this as a temporary or inadequate housing situation or if they were in another temporary or inadequate housing situation (i.e., experiencing homelessness). We identified respondents as housing unstable if they were currently homeless per those criteria or if they were not currently homeless but had experienced an eviction in the prior year. Second, we drew upon district administrative data to capture additional students who experienced homelessness. There were some students that districts identified as homeless in their administrative data whose parents did not report experiencing homelessness on survey. Using these data help us capture additional

students who may have experienced homelessness before or (especially) after we fielded our survey.

We started our analysis by describing the characteristics of Detroit students experiencing homelessness and housing instability and comparing them to students with stable housing. We started summarizing survey respondents' housing status and their types and duration of housing. We then examined demographics to identify any student subgroups groups that were overrepresented in homelessness or housing instability, and compared students' socioeconomic circumstances (e.g., income, employment, receipt of social services) and transportation access (e.g., car ownership, mode of transportation to school) by housing status. For each of these comparisons, we summarize mean values for each group and tested the statistical significance of differences using bivariate regressions.

Next, we examined the differences between those students experiencing homelessness or housing instability who were identified as homeless by their districts and those were not identified. We summarized the share of students who were and weren't identified. We contextualized these findings by examining trends in the rate of homelessness identification in Detroit over the past decade based on state administrative data.

Finally, we used regression analysis to examine the association between outcomes for students experiencing homelessness or housing instability and whether the students were or were not identified as homeless that year. We focused on three outcomes: attendance, suspensions, and mobility. For attendance, we used both the student's attendance rate and whether or not they were chronically absent as outcomes. For suspensions, we used whether they ever received an OSS as the outcome. For mobility, we used a self-reported survey measure of their intentions to change schools for the 2022-23 school year; we coded them as planning to change schools they answered

that they were likely or very likely to do so. We estimated this association based on the following equation:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Identified_i + \beta_2 Z_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where, for student i, Y is the outcome, *Identified* is a binary indicator of whether or not the student was identified as homeless, and Z is a vector of covariates (student demographics, student grade level, school type, type of housing, length of current housing). Our dependent variable of interest is whether or not a student was identified as homeless (β_1); the coefficient for this variable would indicate whether or not identification is associated with more positive outcomes for students.

Qualitative Data and Analysis

In August 2022, we recruited survey respondents who we identified as experiencing homeless or housing unstable for interviews. To capture a range of different experiences of housing instability, we split potential participants into three groups: those who experienced an eviction in 2021, those who reported living in another situation (e.g., a shelter, a public place, moving from place to place), and those who were doubled-up. We randomly recruited participants from each group, offering a $25 gift card as a participation incentive. In total, we interviewed twenty parents—twelve from DPSCD and eight from charter schools—representing a total of forty-seven children.

Interviews lasted approximately one hour, and we used a semi-structured approach to ask detailed questions about families' housing histories and interactions with school and district staff. We started by asking detailed questions about the family's current housing circumstances and their recent housing history (including any changes in housing and any factors that led them to experience homelessness or housing instability). We then asked about the challenges that the parents and students faced due to their housing instability or current housing circumstances,

especially focusing on issues related to enrollment, attendance, and engagement. Next, we asked about whether and how the parents interacted with school- or district-based staff in relation to their housing instability and why, and whether they received any support from the school, district, or other community and social service providers. We also asked questions about families' access to transportation and how that intersected with housing issues.

We analyzed the qualitative data in three phases. We started by developing a qualitative code book based on our research questions and other salient factors in the extant literature. We applied these codes to the interview transcripts through a round of deductive coding. Second, we reexamined excerpts with the same codes and re-coded each excerpt thematically. Finally, we wrote a set of analytic memos to synthesize the themes and distill key findings.

Findings

Housing Instability among Detroit Students

In our January 2022 survey data, we found that about 13% of Detroit students would 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).[1] To put this in context, based on recent statewide data, few districts in Michigan have comparably high rates of homelessness and housing instability (Erb-Downward & Evangelist, 2018). Detroit may have the highest rate among large districts in Michigan and is close to the top ten overall in Michigan recorded rates of student homelessness or housing instability. Importantly, even this 16% estimate is likely an undercount, given the low rate at which districts appear to identify students experiencing homelessness or housing instability (discussed below).

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[1] We identified about 13% of students as experiencing homelessness or housing instability in January 2022 based on our survey data and identified the additional 3% from the district-provided administrative data.

Among students experiencing housing instability, we identified about 11% as homeless because they were currently "doubled up" or living in another temporary or inadequate housing situation (or identified as homeless by their districts). Based on our survey data, for the large majority of students experiencing homelessness, their parent reported that they lived "doubled up" with a family member or friend, while a smaller share lived in a shelter or another temporary housing circumstance (Table 2).[2] Around a fifth of these homeless students had also experienced an eviction in 2021. While many have been in their current circumstances for a short time, nearly half indicated that they have lived in their current housing circumstances for more than three years (Figure 1). We identified the remaining 5% of students as otherwise housing unstable because they had experienced an eviction within the past twelve months but were not currently homeless. For these recently evicted students, their parents reported renting at much higher rates than stably housed students and reported living in the current housing situation for a much shorter duration.

Challenges of Homelessness and Housing Instability

Housing

Being homeless is costly, even with the presence of aid. For many of our interviewees, unstable housing situations came with hidden costs. These ranged from transportation expenses like insurance and repairs, to accessing food without refrigeration and needing to replace pantry staples. Resource-strapped families were often forced into tough financial decisions that prolonged their periods of housing instability. Some families turned to family or friends for shelter when they were evicted or otherwise could not afford housing. These situations often put families in difficult positions, in which they were also expected to cover a disproportionate amount of household responsibilities, making it harder to save for a place of their own. As one parent told us:

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[2] The remaining homeless students whose parents reported renting or owning a home on our survey are the students who were at some point identified as homeless by their districts.

Well, honestly, the back and forth thing, living with people, honestly I don't like living with people, I like to have my own. I pride myself on having my own, and people aren't always genuine as they seem. And it was getting to the point to where I was just wasting money more than saving money I was supposed to. And then spending money at rooms weekly was very expensive.

Another parent shared:

And then staying with other people, paying them, they wanted more and then they felt like because you're living with them, you're entitled to take care of their whole household or their children. Or if I'm putting food in the refrigerator for me and my kids, it's just like, "Oh, okay, we'll eat it. No problem." But then what are we going to eat?

Parents would often be forced to choose between food, rent, and transportation as they could not afford all three. Participants who received help from family and friends still had to buffer hidden expenses and navigate loss of personal space. For some families experiencing homelessness, partial or total loss of their benefits occurred. These intersecting burdens meant that many of our participants felt they had to choose between different necessities while navigating homelessness as parents. This balancing act of bureaucratic, financial, and familial burdens created more hurdles for already resource-strapped families. One parent succinctly described an experience shared by many of our participants: "So I'm either sacrificing food, I'm sacrificing transportation, [or] I'm sacrificing personal needs." Another parent described the difficult choices she had to make in searching for adequate housing for her family: "I saved up money to buy a house, and I spent everything I had because I have to live off the money for the house. My car is broke down, I can't get it fixed. It's choices. The same choices you face every day."

Because of either a lack of formal rental history or the presence of evictions on their credit reports, the housing market available to our low-income respondents was both sparse and predatory. Turning to either the internet or networks of friends and family, housing unstable families were vulnerable to scams and illegal renting situations. Some online rental listings turned out to be fraudulent. Legitimate rental listings would be mixed in with fake ones created by people posing as landlords or management companies. As some management companies charge an upfront application fee just to fill out an online form, the two could be indistinguishable. Several parents described the difficulty finding legitimate offers for housing:

> I feel, of course, just because in these times a lot of people have been taken advantage. I was evicted from housing I'd paid in full, my bills on time, all the time. So, I should never been evicted, but with all the fraud and scams going on, that's kind of what happened. I got scammed out of a lease.

Many parents described the enormous administrative burdens of searching for housing while managing the other challenges of housing instability. One parent quantified her efforts to find housing:

> I did find some legit housing resources, but I just didn't have the adequate money to live in there. And then like I said, some were scams, some was so legit, I thought it was legit and it was a scam, and I literally lost a deposit. I mean I probably did more than 50. I probably did a hundred tries, but 50 were legit and most of them didn't want to rent to first timers and then the other percent were bad lords or scam landlords.

One Black single mother found herself paying rent to someone who no longer owned the property:

> I wasn't aware that the people we were renting from actually sold the building to someone out of state, and we did not know that until... I had been paying my rent to the old landlord

not knowing. Until the new company calls, it was like, "Hey, you're missing two months' worth of rent." I'm like, "Who are you? I don't even know who you are."

Even with legitimate rentals our low-income respondents who had evictions on their credit report were limited to the kind of housing options that were highly competitive or mirrored what they had just fled.

Income and Work

Our survey data highlight the precarious socioeconomic position faced by Detroit students experiencing homelessness and housing instability (Table 3). On average, homeless and housing unstable students had significantly lower family incomes than stably housed students. Homeless students were also significantly less likely to have a parent employed at all or employed full time. Notably, the parents of other unstably housed students (i.e., those who experienced an eviction but were not currently homeless) were employed at similar rates to parents of stably housed students. Yet, in terms of having a parent working full-time, unstably housed students had lower rates compared to stably housed students, like homeless students.

Our qualitative analysis evidences the challenges with work created by housing instability. For many of our participants, job insecurity was either a cause of their housing instability or a consequence of it. Parents balanced complicated schedules, considered both the start and end of school times, before or after school childcare, the start and end of their own workday, and transportation to and from all three as they navigated the complications of work, housing instability, and parenting. Two of the parents we interviewed had the added conflict of their own schooling. Because of competing schedules and little job flexibility, some of our participants were forced to change jobs, schools, or both. As one parent shared, "I ended up basically quitting my job to take them to school, because I didn't want to just switch schools in the middle of the year."

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Many parents discussed the challenges of work and school times conflicting, particularly when there was not after-school care they could rely on: "So there came a point of time where I had to pull the girls out of school before 3:30. So I was getting there like 2:30 because I had an evening class and I wouldn't have had no one to pick them up, and I wouldn't have been eligible to pick them up until after 6:00, and the school was closed."

Employers that were sympathetic to parents were both helpful and less common. Some employers would offer schedule flexibility to accommodate the school day. Others allowed child-care strapped parents to bring their children to work. Only three of our respondents expressed having flexibility within their schedules; one of those three was self-employed and another worked for her father's business: "So my husband does own his own business, but that's part of the reason why he does. He went into business for himself so that we could be there to drop them off and pick them up…We could make our own schedule, basically."

Far more frequently, parents did not have flexibility in their work schedules, often having to fear job loss if late or absent. One parent described the penalties associated with balancing work and childcare, while being housing unstable: "So if you're late or need to leave early for unexcused, you get a half a point. If it's an illness or something like that, even with documentation, you get a whole point. You get up to six points for termination. You get three points, you get a written verbal or something like that." Another parent described the insensitivity some employers showed to their employees' difficult circumstances: "It was challenging because they were being insensitive to my situation. I mean, I understand a company has to be ran, but if your employee is in distress, they should be a little bit more sensitive, which they weren't."

Aside from navigating work and school schedules, several parents had to work long, arduous hours to save up for new housing. These difficult work schedules were not just physically

taxing, but they placed strain upon families, pulling parents away from being more active or present in their children's lives: "I have a job, but then I also have my kids who are in school and I have to be there for them and still be mom when I come home. It just was a lot. But I'm the type that I have to do what works for myself and them. If that means me having to step away from one job to look for something better, then I'm always willing to do that." A common theme among many parents was the competing priorities they felt between earning income for their families and being there for their children. As one parent described: "I recently left my job because I was ... I was made to be ... You have to pick to be a mom, or do you want to be ... Do you want to work? And I was at risk of missing my son's graduation." For other parents, long commutes to work, on top of housing instability, childcare, and other costs, meant that they sacrificed their own basic needs for the sake of their children:

> Well, I was working. I was working, which I was catching a bus back and forth to work. I
> was staying on the west side, my job was on the east side of town, so I was catching a bus
> back and forth. Also, still dropping my kids off at daycare, and I worked morning shifts.
> So, after a while it became [too] much, and I was eating late, and I wasn't making that
> much. So, catching a bus back and forth, spending money, cash money on food, rooms. It
> had got to the point, honestly, some days I didn't eat as long as they were fine.

Other causes of job loss and financial instability were the result of unexpected events or underemployment. Two parents experienced car accidents, which left them both requiring time to physically heal and the need for a car, causing two sources of financial need. Unstably housed parents' ability to find new or better employment was hindered by their financial challenges: "[T]hen even trying to find employment after that because I didn't really have the vehicle was

dreadful, and a lot of [employers] actually ask you nowadays, "Do you have reliable transportation?"

Social Services

We also found gaps in social service receipt for students experiencing homelessness and housing instability (Table 4). In line with their challenging socioeconomic circumstances, most of these students benefit from food assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and medical insurance through Medicaid. Yet, a significant share reported previously but not currently receiving SNAP (21.9%) and Medicaid (9.8%). In addition, emergency funding assistance through Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and housing subsidies through Section 8 vouchers could provide significant relief to these students and their families. Yet, despite their need for economic relief and stable housing, very few parents of unstably housed students reported currently receiving TANF (8.3%) or Section 8 (10.1%).

The parents we interviewed described Section 8 as all but inaccessible. Of our twenty participants, only three had ever received Section 8. Each of those three had either lost part of or all of their housing benefit while still experiencing housing stability. More than half of our respondents had applied for Section 8 yet had never been approved. One participant echoed the sentiment of the majority: "I've been trying to apply for Section 8 since I was 18. Still don't got it." Another parent shared: "I've never received it. I don't understand how. I've reached out as much as I could to everybody. And I know some people can pull strings, but it just never happened for me." Housing difficulties were still present for the two participants who did receive Section 8.

Complicated logistics that required approval from caseworkers made it harder for housing-unstable tenants to find new homes or to keep their full voucher amounts long-term. Other benefits like cash assistance, Medicaid, and food stamps (SNAP) were also hard to navigate for our sample

of families. Some ran into caseworkers reducing or cutting their aid, while others applied but were still waiting for their benefits to be distributed. One mother mentioned that she was approved, but that the amount was not enough to account for rising inflation. As another parent described, there was sometimes little to no explanation for a reduction in benefits: "No problem with my Medicaid, but with my food stamps, which this doesn't make sense. I told my worker I was homeless, and she cut my stamps to $66. That don't make sense." Similarly, a parent said: "They said I was approved for a certain dollar amount in June. They said I was approved for about $400 in July. They have not sent me a Bridge Card. And then they said for August, it's zero dollars, ongoing investigation." The financial precarity of uncertain benefits exacerbated the challenges many families had in managing housing instability alongside the educational needs of their children.

Transportation

Transportation to and from school can be challenging for many families in poverty. Those with housing instability, including evictions and uncertainty about where the family will sleep at night, adds another layer of difficulty and, often, expense. In our survey data, we found significantly greater transportation challenges faced by students experiencing homelessness and housing instability than those with stable housing. Homeless students had the lowest rates of family car ownership, and other unstably housed students also had substantially lower rates of family car ownership than stably housed students (Table 5). Relatedly, as shown in Figure 2, students experiencing homelessness and housing instability more frequently relied on someone else to get to school—their parents more often borrowed someone else's car and they more often received a ride from someone other than their parents. In addition, homeless students more often walked to school than both other unstably housed students and stably housed students.

These challenges were illustrated in our qualitative analysis. Navigating the complex schedules required to get children to and from school and oneself to and from work while changing homes regularly is both mentally and financially taxing. Frequently, our participants were relocated further away, creating more distance between necessary social networks and daily needs. Cases of increased distance from school and work were only exacerbated by transportation costs, such as a parent who shared that she had to drive her children to her parents' house before making it to work in Southfield so that her parents could help get them to school. These complicated logistics caused many families to choose between transportation to work or school. In three cases these scheduling conflicts led to parents losing their employment:

> I would have to actually have to stop working. I would have to keep putting two weeks in notices because I didn't want to keep being late or calling off, because I didn't have reliable transportation. And honestly, it really is just me. I don't have parents. Both my parents are deceased, My kids' grandparents are deceased. I don't have the average help that some people might have, I guess.

Three parents had conflicts with their children's school while they were experiencing housing instability. One parent was one of our few participants to receive McKinney-Vento, yet after being extended these services for a year, the school transferred her children to another school located closer to where the family had been relocated. "[T]he only thing they did was told me that I didn't qualify and looked up what school was close to me and that was it." A second mother echoed this experience "[T]hey transferred my daughter's school." Another single mother was juggling her own work and school schedule during a period of homelessness and faced a double-edged sword with her children's attendance:

[The school was] basically like, "You know the law. They're missing school." And I'm like, "I mean what do you want me to do?" Because they're leaving an hour early. "Yes, they do need to be in school, but do you want them here and then they're not getting picked up until 6:30 and your building is closed and 99% of your staff are gone?"

Several of our participants made tough compromises in order to keep their children within their original schools. For three parents, the burdens of transportation and competing work schedules during times of housing instability resulted in them changing schools, jobs, or both: "I had to transfer schools and everything, jobs." The parents we spoke with knew that their children should be in school and were often sad and ashamed when they could not live up to their hopes for their children's education: "I just always believe in stability for kids. I don't think that because a situation happened with me where I had to uproot and I dropped the ball and didn't do what I was supposed to do, that they should suffer."

For parents with cars, the cost of maintenance, gas, major repairs, and insurance came up as significant barriers for several parents, with the cost of insurance coming up the most often. The high cost of major car repairs will keep a family without their own mode of transportation for extended periods of time, which has a rippling affect into their ability to get to school, work, and necessary errands like healthcare. As one parent said, "Well right now my paying for car insurance and car note has been hectic because I haven't been working, so just trying to stay on top of my payments." Many parents planned their work schedule around school transportation needs. As bussing is not readily available, many families depended on personal cars for transportation from home, work, school, and childcare. Car expenses, including fuel and major repairs, would impact parents' abilities to transport their children. Rarely did work and school schedules align, causing

after and before school childcare needs. Aside from the cost of gas and repairs, a few families mentioned needing help paying car insurance or car notes.

> And also my trans[mission] is going in my car, so that also, some days my car might drive okay, but then some days it might not. And I can't drive far, so I will only go a certain distance. My daughter's school is honestly, literally right around the corner, and then my son's school, boom, and I can make it back home. Anything more than that, because I will come right home and then don't do anything until I have to pick them up. And then when I pick them up, I come right back here until I work.

Loss of benefits, employment, and loss of preferred school enrollments were listed as consequences of car troubles by Detroit parents. Additionally, families and friends often shared vehicles or transportation burdens causing extra logistical issues. Some parents used services like Uber or Lyft which were expensive and could vary in costs and reliability.

> [W]hen she graduated, I cried tears. Not tears of happiness because, of course, I'm happy. Tears of, "We don't have to catch a Lyft so I don't have to be late work." You don't understand the mental struggle and physical struggle.

This parent's experience illustrates the emotional toll that housing challenges can create for families seeking educational opportunity for their children.

The parents of students experiencing homelessness and other housing instability diverged somewhat in terms of the kinds of transportation they felt would be most helpful (Figure 3). While respondents for most students across housing statuses reported that home-based school bus pickups and gift cards to pay for gas would be helpful, those for unstably housed students (i.e., those who were recently evicted but not currently homeless) expressed the strongest levels of support for these options. They also expressed the strongest support for a bus pickup within a quarter mile of

home. By contrast, fewer than half of the parents of homeless students said a bus within a quarter mile of home option would be helpful. Parents of homeless students also expressed somewhat less support for coordinated carpools than others, and somewhat more support for safe walking routes, though the overall share of parents who said these options would be helpful was similarly much lower than school buses and gift cards. Parents of both homeless and other unstably housed students reported that gift cards for taxis or rideshares would be helpful at greater levels than stably housed parents. These findings were echoed in our qualitative analysis, where many participants felt that if schools had their own dedicated bus and route that they would be more likely to use it. Bussing was the only transportation-based support offered at school level, and it was not available at every school or to all of our families. Some schools may have offered bussing, but displaced parents were frequently relocated outside of the route's boundaries; in other cases, there would be limited space on buses that was no longer available.

The Identification Gap for Students Experiencing Homelessness and Housing Instability

Identifying students as homeless or housing unstable is the first step in providing those students and their families with services under the McKinney-Vento Act, and more broadly in prompting the school to provide additional resources and support. Yet, over the past decade, homeless and unstably housed students in Detroit have been consistently undercounted. As shown in state administrative data, only around two percent of students have been identified as homelessness each year since 2010-11 (Figure 4).

Based on 2021-22 district-provided administrative data, about 4% of the students in our survey sample were identified as homeless (Table 6). 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 about 16% of their students who

experienced homelessness or housing instability (2.1% out of 13.1%). The rate of identification overall and by sector are in line with the identification trends over time shown in Figure 4. As anticipated in prior research (e.g., Erb-Downward et al., 2021), our survey data indicate a significantly higher rate of homelessness and housing instability among Detroit students than what districts have identified.

Some of the gap in identification may be due to the fact that we capture both homelessness and other housing instability due to evictions. Eviction alone would not be grounds for identification under McKinney-Vento if the family immediately found adequate housing. Yet, 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. 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 McKineny-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 homeless students.

In fact, the rate of identification is likely even lower than what we've calculated here. Given the low rates of identification overall and the fact that we only capture housing data directly from parents at one point in time (January 2022), there are likely other students who experienced homelessness or housing instability at other points in time that also weren't identified. Without

data from other points in time, however, we are unable to examine the extent to which the identification gap is even greater.

Just two of the parents who we interviewed were identified by their schools as homeless, both in DPSCD. As one parent said:

> Yes, I talked to [the principal] and that's when they referred me to a program called McKinney-Vento… where no matter where I'm at, they can go to any school and they was getting me transportation for them to get back and forth to school.

Yet, most housing unstable families did not get this kind of support. In our interviews with parents, we found two primary obstacles for schools and districts to effectively identify students experiencing homeless or housing instability: parent trust in discussing housing challenges with schools and lack of follow-through when parents did share with their schools.

Parent Trust

One of the biggest challenges facing schools in identifying students under McKinney-Vento and providing support to housing unstable families was trust. While 8 of our 20 interview participants told someone at the school about their housing challenges, 11 participants feared reaching out to their schools because of personal embarrassment, social stigma, or fear of negative consequences. Many parents were embarrassed of their situation and did not want anyone to know. As one parent said when asked why she did not tell anyone at the school about her housing troubles, "Because in the first place it's embarrassing. I don't know, I just try to handle all my stuff on my own." Similarly, 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."

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Parents worried about the social stigma associated with homelessness and did not want to be judged harshly by school staff: "I don't want to be stereotyped, not saying that they would do that. And I don't want no one to be biased about the situation if I'm just looking for pity or something of that sort. And I know it sounds crazy, but it was just uncomfortable." Another parent shared that she did not tell the school because "I was raised where it was you don't talk. What goes on here stays here. And even as an adult I carried that with me."

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, with the implication that her children might be removed from her care: "No. I wasn't telling nobody that so they could tell CPS."

Finally, a few parents we spoke to felt that their housing concerns were not relevant to the school. This was the case especially for families that were able to more quickly find adequate housing or who had supports and resources to mitigate the negative affects of homelessness on their children. When asked why she did not share with the school, one parent said, "Because, if it would've been a situation that should've been missing consistent school hours, I would've brought it to their attention. But it was like at the time that I had help. So, I wouldn't have been able to stress the issue about it." Another parent felt that her situation was not dire enough to seek help at the school:

I'm not without a house, so I don't want to take away from people that are really on the street. 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.

This suggests that some parents may not have sufficient information about the purpose of McKinney-Vento and the services available.

When asked about it by name, only two of our respondents were familiar with McKinney-Vento, despite four being recipients of school level support. Other respondents seemed to confuse or associate school-specific resources with those provided through government agencies, like Section 8. As in the case with one mother fearing CPS, many of our parents were unaware of the resources and legal protections available to them. In other cases, parents felt that since they had some form of housing they were not technically homeless and would be taking from others with more need.

Having and building relationships at the school was a key factor in making successful connections for our housing unstable families. For families who told someone in the school about their housing issues, such as a teacher or principal, having a good relationship helped make the process of reaching out to the school easier. For example, a parent described the relationship they had with the school as significant. She was comfortable in sharing about her current housing situation with the principal and a teacher who used to work at the school. As a result of talking with some of the school staff members, they provided help with extending drop off and pick up times when she had to either get to work early or was working late and couldn't get to the school in time for dismissal. Each of our families that received school level supports were able to do so out of the comfort that had been built through interpersonal relationships with someone on the school staff, as described by one parent: *"Well, they know who I am, that's why I was comfortable enough to talk to them about it."* Another parent described how stability with the school created a

comfort level with the staff: "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." Finally, parents who had been engaged in the school saw opportunities to build enough trust to share her housing challenges with them:

> Because now I actually participate, they have meetings and stuff at this school and everyone pretty much knows me and who I am, so I just feel more better talking to the principal and different staff meeting members at that school."

These findings suggest that engaging parents throughout the school year to build trusting relationships could support information-sharing that can lead to more accurate identification of housing unstable students, as well as greater support for families.

Lack of School Follow-Through

Although less frequent than parents not sharing their housing issues with the school, another potential contributing factor to under-identification was the lack of school follow-through when parents did divulge to someone at the school. In several cases, parents told someone at the school who they trusted, such as a teacher or principal who they had a relationship with, but the parent was not offered support or services, nor were they identified under McKinney-Vento.

Just two of the 20 housing unstable parents we interviewed were identified for McKinney-Vento by their schools. Ten of the 18 students who were not identified indicated on our January 2022 survey that they were homeless, with seven living doubled-up and three living in a shelter, a public place, or moving from place to place. Of these 10 parents, half shared their housing challenges with someone at the school, and yet they were not identified as homeless in the administrative data. Several of these parents shared about their housing instability with their child's teacher, but nothing came of that conversation – the student was not identified as homeless

in the administrative data and the school did not offer any support, even when families explicitly asked about transportation help while they were 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. Similarly, another mom shared what happened when her son told his teacher that they were living in a shelter: "[His teacher] told me that if I needed anything, to let her know." When asked if anyone at the school followed up or offered resources, she said "no." These examples illustrate that, even when families do feel comfortable enough to share their housing issues with the school, the school may not formally identify them as homeless or offer them support. In several cases, it may have been that the teachers who learned about families' housing troubles did not know about McKinney-Vento or understand how the school could have helped.

The Role of Schools in Addressing Homelessness and Housing Instability

Only four of our twenty respondents received some form of aid from their schools during their periods of housing instability. Two of those four respondents knew of McKinney-Vento by name and received some aid from McKinney-Vento, one of which received transportation aid through school bussing. One of the two other parents unfamiliar with McKinney-Vento also received bussing; the final parent had her own car and instead got help with replacing home furnishings like mattresses. The most common form of aid that schools were able to offer came via transportation services and hygiene products, followed by references to other outside sources of aid. As one parent shared: "They did offer me some hygiene supplies, so toothbrushes, toothpaste, stuff like that... And they was getting me transportation for them to get back and forth

to school." In some cases these supports were funded through McKinney-Vento and in others the school was providing them through other means, such as donations.

One parent who received transportation support and help with Christmas presents had challenges navigating the outside resources she was directed towards, this being its own barrier. "I really do think if I had someone ask me to physically help me, instead of sending me links and stuff, because I'm not too good with that either, I probably would do better, as far as home finding." The schools that offered aid to our housing-unstable families were able to do so through the connections that were built with the families. In some cases, our parents developed bonds with different school staff members who offered their own time and resources to help. One parent who was employed at a school while dealing with her housing instability received help from a colleague who had shared family members.

Some schools went above and beyond the resources offered through McKinney-Vento to ensure that families were supported. One parent described how her children had been enrolled there for a long time, and she felt comfortable telling the teacher and principal when they were facing homelessness. The school offered resources to help her find housing and she said, "One of the teachers actually got me and my kids a room for a whole week." While this outsized support should not be expected of schools, it was clear from our analysis that cultivating strong relationships with families and proactively offering support could be beneficial to students experiencing homelessness.

Homelessness Identification and Student Outcomes

How did the educational experiences and outcomes of students experiencing homelessness or housing instability differ based on whether they were identified by their district as homeless or not? Table 7 shows preliminary results of our regression analysis for four outcomes: chronic

absenteeism, attendance rate, ever receiving an OSS, and parents' intention to switch schools (i.e., student mobility).[3] Of those, only the association between identification and ever receiving an OSS was statistically significant. Descriptively, none of the identified students received a suspension, whereas 3.5% of the unidentified students did. Controlling for demographics, the regression-adjusted association is 0.04, meaning unidentified students were 4% more likely to be suspended than identified students. Although we treat these findings as preliminary, this may suggest that identification could be a protective factor from exclusionary discipline, either because school staff is more lenient for students who are experiencing homelessness or because identified families are receiving supports that are mitigating the harmful impacts and potential behavioral health consequences that may have led to problem behavior.

In our qualitative data, we found that housing instability can create difficult transportation, attendance, and enrollment challenges for students, particularly when they were not identified for McKinney-Vento resources or when they lost access to those resources after becoming stably housed. Eight of the parents we interviewed were looking for new schools, but only three of those were doing so by choice. Two were looking for more advanced curriculum or special services for their children. Another two parents were on waiting lists for schools located closer to their new homes. The other four were forced to enroll in new schools more closely located to their new places of inhabitance or family networks. This was largely because of transportation issues and a lack of available transportation services. As one parent described:

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[3] We treat these results as preliminary because we only capture homelessness and housing instability data directly from parents at one point in time (discussed in the section on the identification gap). There may be other students in our survey data who experienced homelessness before or after January 2022 and whom the district did not identify. If we had the ability to identify all of those students, we might find different associations between student outcomes and homelessness identification. Again, without data from other points in time, we are unable to examine the association between identification and outcomes with greater certainty.

[My kids' first school], because of transportation, they end up cutting me off transportation since they feel like I got a home. But I still needed the transportation, because I work and I'm not able to take my kids all the way to [the other school] But I end up basically quitting my job to take them to school, because I didn't want to just switch schools in the middle of the year. I just kept taking them, but this year, I can't do that, so I'm going to send them up, but somewhere close to us.

Other parents discussed how they felt either forced into switching schools because they could not maintain enrollment in their children's school of origin after finding new housing or choosing to switch to a school closer to their new home.

Seven of our participants stated that their children had attendance issues while experiencing housing instability: This was often due to conflicting schedules caused by their changing housing status, transportation issues, and/or childcare. For instance, one parent shared that her children missed school as they were switching housing: "They were missing a few days. Yeah, because we moved in the middle of the week, so I believe that this was on a Wednesday, so they didn't go Wednesday, Thursday or Friday." Other parents discussed the added stressors of work, rising prices, and lack of housing on their children's attendance: "And with the gas prices, that was hard. I'm not going to lie, some days he did miss school because I did not have the gas to go back and forth." One parent, when asked what happened when her and her children had to be to work and school at the same time, replied "they go to work with me."

Discussion

This study has implications for school and district policy and practice, as well as policy within other agencies and social sectors that interact with housing vulnerable families. We recognize and appreciate that schools cannot do it all, and they should not be asked to. Therefore,

our recommendations for school leaders focus on what we see as within their reach to better support students and families experiencing housing instability. In turn, our recommendations for other policymakers and practitioners focus on what they can and should be doing to better support families as well as schools in their efforts to improve educational experiences and outcomes for youth experiencing homelessness and eviction.

Our findings point to several potential areas for improvement for schools and districts. First, under-identification of housing unstable youth is a major problem. We estimate that Detroit schools are only identifying about a quarter of housing unstable youth as homeless under McKinney-Vento. This means that a significant number of families are not getting the educational support they have a right to under the law. Our qualitative findings suggest that schools can improve identification by reducing the stigma around homelessness for families, so that they inform the school about their housing situation. This could be done through marketing and information campaigns, conversations between school staff and parents, or even training or outreach through PTAs or parent academies. In addition, schools should ensure that all staff who interact with students and parents know about and understand the McKinney-Vento Act, including how to refer a parent to the homeless liaison when they hear about a housing issue. Staff should also be trained about the difference between housing instability and child neglect, since homelessness and poverty are not, on their own, grounds for Child Protective Services involvement. Parents and staff should get the same message that families are to be supported – not punished – when they inform the school about their housing issue.

Families are more likely to talk with someone at the school when they feel comfortable and supported already, as shown in the examples when parents did discuss their housing concerns. Schools should continue to invest in building a positive school culture with students and families,

focused on student and parent support. Schools and districts might also consider doing direct outreach to families multiple times a year to gather information or offer support on housing. Since families' housing situations can change during the school year, this information should not only be collected at the beginning of the school year. In addition, when parents do talk to the school about their housing problems, schools can do a better job following up to ensure families are getting the resources they have a right to, including transportation to their school of origin, basic needs support, and referrals to find adequate, fixed housing.

For other agencies and policymakers, this study highlights the difficult predicament families of school-aged children find themselves in when they face homelessness or eviction. Affordable housing is too difficult to come by and parents face challenging tradeoffs between supporting their families through employment, finding housing, and ensuring their children are in school. The City of Detroit could do more to ensure that families know and understand their right to counsel when facing an eviction, and more support could be offered for families experiencing homelessness. In addition, attorneys and other agencies working with housing unstable families should develop better systems of coordination with their clients' schools, and they should inform their clients about McKinney-Vento and their educational rights under the law. More could also be done to support parents' employment when experiencing housing instability. They could be offered additional legal protection or resources to assist them in getting to work while also ensuring their children are in school. This study emphasizes that supporting students who are experiencing housing instability will require complex, multi-faceted approaches both in and outside school systems, as well as efforts from government agencies to reduce poverty and address the root causes of homelessness.

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Table 1

Housing Status for Detroit Students, January 2022

Housing Status	Share of Students
Housing Unstable	15.9%
Homeless	*10.8%*
Other Housing Unstable (evicted in 2021)	*5.1%*
Stable Housing	84.1%

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

Table 2

Housing Type for Detroit Students, January 2022

	All Students	Homeless	Other Housing Unstable	Stable Housing
Own	32.5%	4.4%[a]	15.1%	37.1%
Rent	59.2%	19.4%[a]	84.9%	62.9%
"Doubled Up"	6.1%	55.1%	-	-
Other Temporary/Inadequate	2.2%	21.1%	-	-

Source: Detroit PEER representative survey of Detroit students (January 2022).

[a] Some students identified as homeless by their schools at some point during the 2021-22 school year may have been in stable housing in January 2022, when the survey was administered.

Table 3

Income and Employment by Housing Status for Detroit Students, January 2022

	Homeless	Other Housing Unstable	Stable Housing
Family Income	$18,439.42	$19,896.53	$30,176.20[ab]
Income-to-Poverty Ratio	0.60	0.71	1.08[ab]
Any Employed Parent	67.8%	86.2%	83.0%[a]
Any Full-Time Employed Parent	52.5%	52.0%	63.7%[ab]

Source: Detroit PEER representative survey of Detroit students (January 2022)

[a]statistically significantly different from homeless and other housing unstable, *p<0.001*

[b]statistically significantly different from homeless and other housing unstable, *p<0.001*

Table 4

Social Services of Housing Unstable Students for Detroit Students, January 2022

Social Service	Share Housing Unstable…	
	Currently Receiving	Previously Received
SNAP	73.5%	21.9%
TANF	8.3%	21.5%
Medicaid	84.0%	9.8%
Section 8 Vouchers	10.1%	11.3%

Source: Detroit PEER representative survey of Detroit students (January 2022)

Table 5

Car Ownership by Housing Status for Detroit Students, January 2022

	Family has a Car
Homeless	51.8%
Other Housing Unstable	57.3%
Stable Housing	70.0%

Source: Detroit PEER representative survey of Detroit students, January 2022

Note: car ownership for students in stable housing is statistically significantly different from students experiencing homelessness or housing instability, *p<0.001*

Table 6

Homelessness Identification in Administrative Data for Detroit Students, 2021-22

	Pct. Students Homeless or Housing Unstable	Pct. Students Identified as Homeless by District
All	15.9%	4.2%
DPSCD	16.9%	4.9%
Charter	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

Table 7

Regression Estimating Detroit Unstably Housed Student Outcomes based on Identification

|	Chronically Absent	Attendance Rate	Ever OSS	Likely to Switch Schools
Not Identified by District	-0.07	0.05	0.04*	0.06
	(-0.06)	(-0.03)	(-0.02)	(-0.06)
Constant	0.92***	0.69***	-0.02	0.03
	(-0.08)	(-0.04)	(-0.01)	(-0.07)
N Students	257	257	257	219
R^2	0.15	0.16	0.07	0.12

Note: Robust standard errors. Covariates included student race/ethnicity, gender, special education status, grade level, and household income. Regression estimating likelihood to switch schools excludes students making "structural moves" (e.g., 8th graders moving to high school).

***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05, +p<0.10
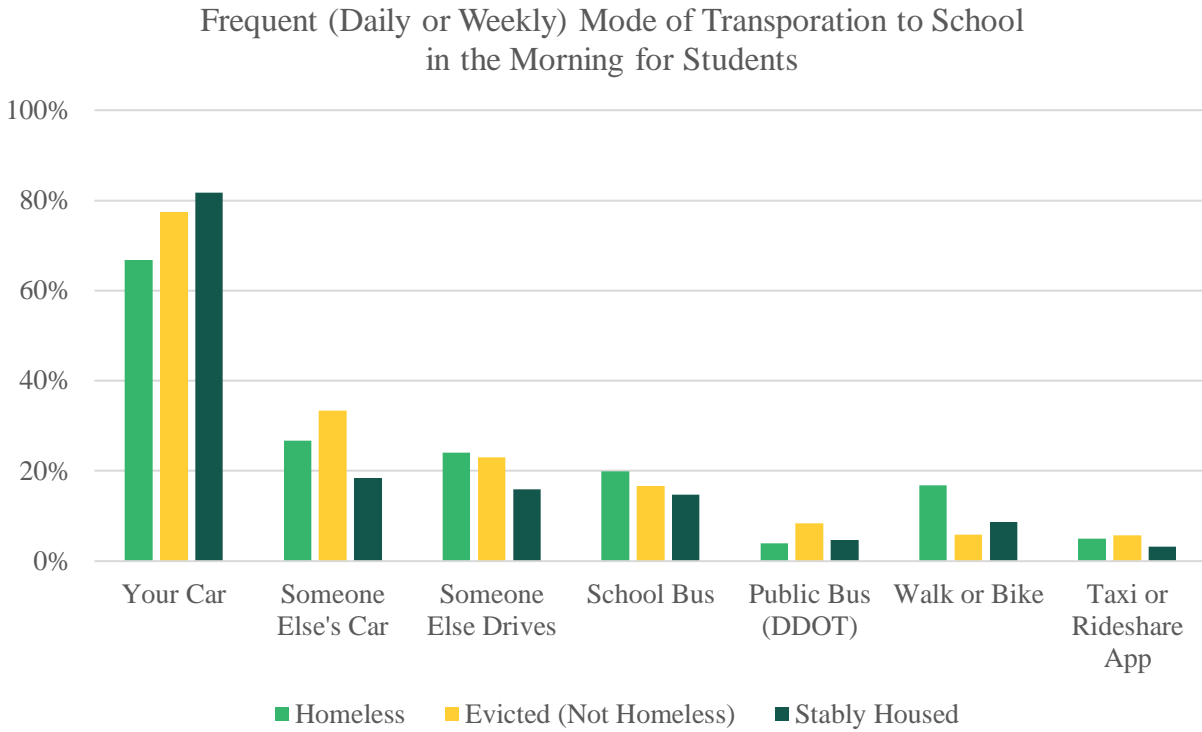
Figures

Figure 1

Housing Duration for Housing Unstable Students in Detroit, January 2022
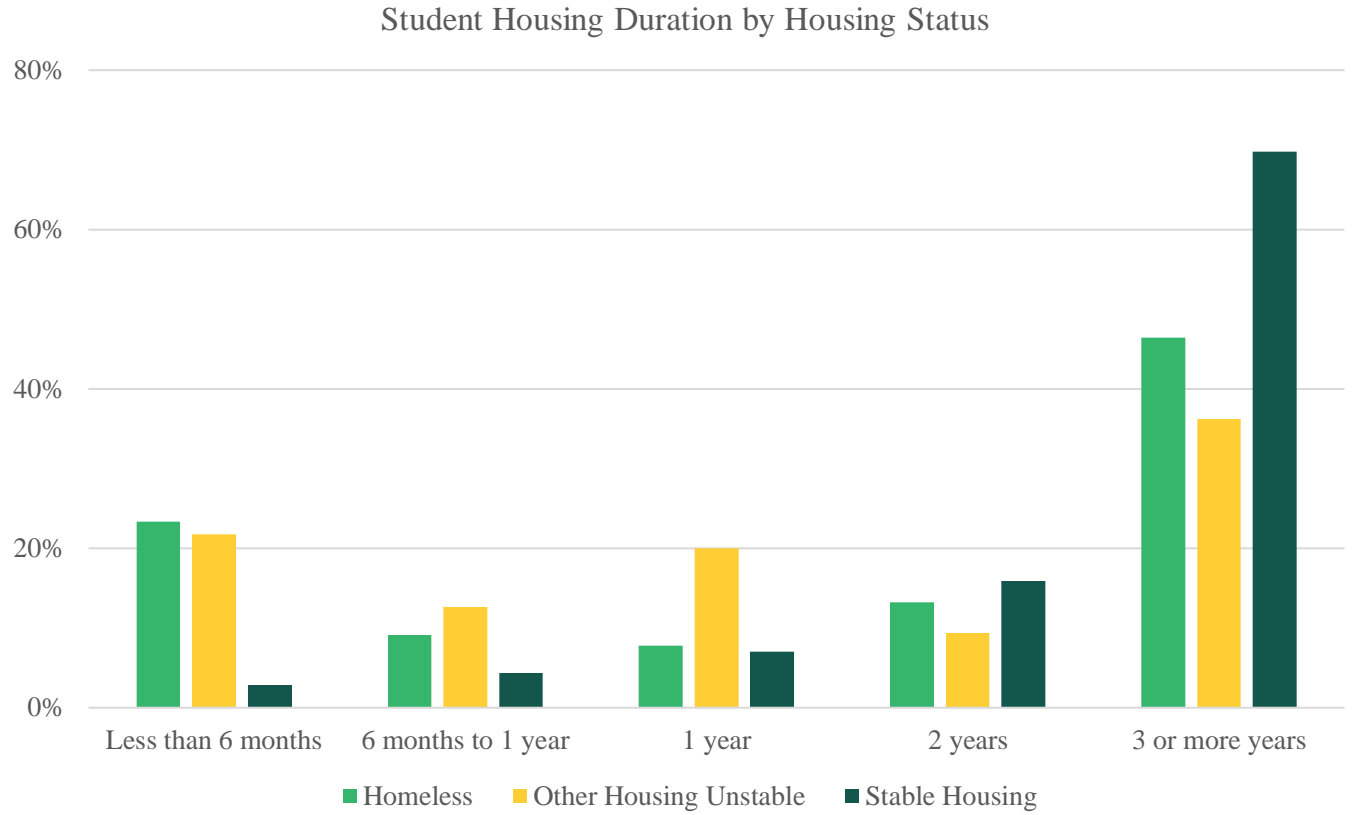
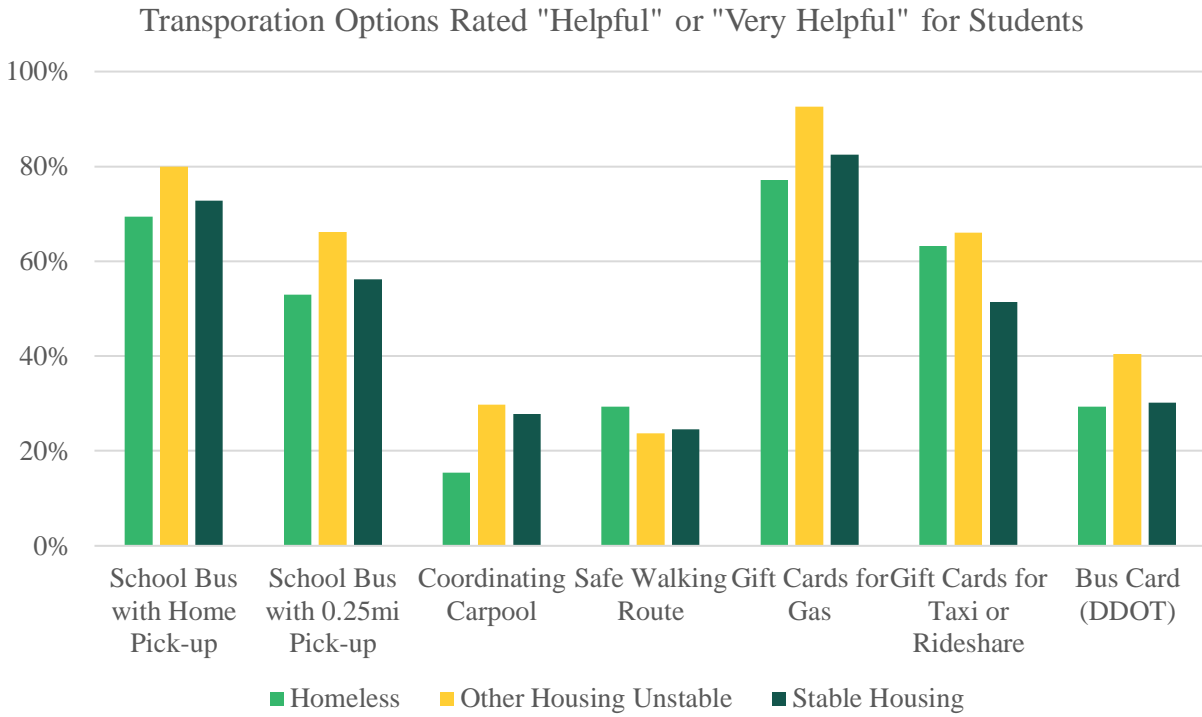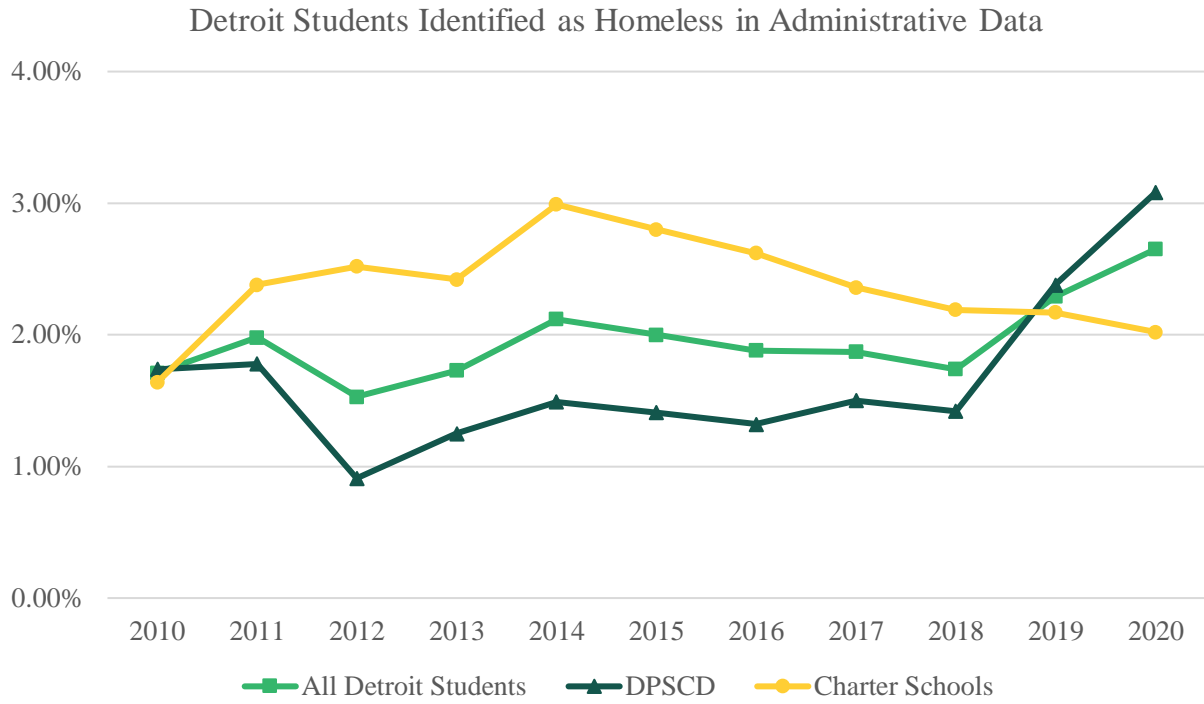Source: Detroit PEER representative survey of Detroit students, January 2022

Figure 2

Transportation Mode by Housing Status for Students in Detroit, January 2022

Frequent (Daily or Weekly) Mode of Transporation to School in the Morning for Students

Source: Detroit PEER representative survey of Detroit students, January 2022

Figure 3

Transportation Preferences by Housing Status for Students in Detroit, January 2022

Transporation Options Rated "Helpful" or "Very Helpful" for Students

Source: Detroit PEER representative survey of Detroit students, January 2022

Figure 4

Homelessness Identification Rates for Detroit Students Over Time

Detroit Students Identified as Homeless in Administrative Data

Source: Michigan student-level administrative data from the Center for Educational Performance and Information

Appendix A: Survey Methodology

We conducted a representative survey of students in the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) and Detroit charter schools in January 2022. We conducted a stratified random sample of students from three groups of schools: DPSCD neighborhood schools, DPSCD selective schools (i.e., application- or exam-based schools), and charter schools. Our survey population was all K-12 students enrolled in DPSCD neighborhood and application/exam schools and about 40% of Detroit charter schools. (The remaining charter schools declined to participate in the study.) We offered participants a $15 gift card for completing the survey.

DPSCD and charter districts provided rosters from which we sampled students. We received both complete and partial responses, and for this study we considered responses as complete if they were not missing data on homelessness or housing insecurity from the survey. In total we had 1,790 responses. This translates to a response rate of approximately 18%, which is consistent with other survey research in Detroit conducted at the time (Gerber & Morenoff, 2021).

For our analysis, we constructed analytic survey weights through "raking" (Cohen, 2008). Raking is an algorithmic technique that adjusts survey weights to align a sample with population totals across multiple observed characteristics. This approach is useful for weighting with stratified random samples since the pool of respondents will disproportionately overrepresent some groups by design. We used raking to construct analytic weights that would align the data with the survey population totals. We used the "ipfraking" command in Stata (Kolenikov, 2017), and as parameters for the algorithm we used survey population statistics for student gender, race or ethnicity, grade level, district enrollment, and school type.