

Too often, students whose families are in the midst of a housing crisis escape the notice of the two systems most able to mobilize services to help: the school district and human services. According to an analysis conducted by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS), this identification gap is largely the result of the different definitions that school districts and human services agencies use to identify who is homeless.

The analysis found that there was little overlap between students defined as homeless by the two systems. In other words, DHS does not identify as homeless the students whom the schools determine to be homeless, while school districts are not aware of many students identified as homeless by DHS.

This disconnect can affect access to eligible support services for students and their families. It also raises questions about the accuracy of data showing how many students face a housing crisis — data that were already considered undercounts and, in some cases, are used to determine public funding levels for the very programs and services designed to address such students' needs.

Evidence of the identification gap was found in school and human services information gathered under data-sharing agreements between DHS and 14 Allegheny County school districts and educational organizations. Reported last year, the findings have led to the formation of partnerships and collaborative efforts to better understand the scope and needs of students in a housing crisis, close the identification gap, and create interventions to prevent unfavorable living conditions from disrupting their education.

EDUCATION AT RISK

Homeless students endure many hardships, ranging from the stress associated with being in an unstable and possibly unsafe living situation to the upheaval of being moved from one school to another, each time having to adjust to new classmates, teachers and curricula.

It's not surprising that researchers find that homeless students generally perform worse across several measures of academic performance. Studies have found, for example, that homeless students miss school and perform below grade level at higher rates than classmates whose housing is stable. And the rate of high school graduation is much lower for homeless students.

Interviews with homeless students, conducted in 2014 by DHS staff, offer just a glimpse of the impact of experiencing a housing crisis. Students reported being less open and feeling more vulnerable. Others discussed how difficult it was to move from one shelter to another, particularly as it affected school attendance. Even when they were able to stay in the same school, transportation was complicated and afterschool activities were often impossible. One student, whose family was staying in an emergency shelter and who was suspended from school for a day, spent the day with nowhere to go and nothing to eat.

“We had a family living in the Salvation Army Family Crisis Center who paid a jitney driver every day to get the children to school. [The mother] was afraid to tell the school they were in a shelter because it wasn't in the school district and she thought she would have to enroll them somewhere else,” said Samantha Murphy, DHS educational liaison. “Had she told the school, the district would have provided transportation.”

DHS, provider agencies and the schools provide a range of services designed to lessen the impact of homelessness on students and their parents. These services range from emergency shelter, transitional housing and case management, to free school lunches, summer educational programs, and transportation to and from their home school, even when they have to move outside of the district as a result of a housing crisis. But in order to receive these services, the students and families need to be identified.

In some cases, families seek help on their own. But many families are hesitant to report their circumstances for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the stigma attached to being homeless.

AN IDENTIFICATION GAP

Since 2009, DHS has entered into legal data-sharing agreements with 14 school districts in Allegheny County. These agreements allow DHS to integrate academic information, such as attendance, grades and enrollment; human service data, such as child welfare service involvement and homeless and housing supports; and data from other systems, such as juvenile justice. The agreements also provide guidelines for using the data for research to gain insight into service-involved students and their circumstances, and to inform existing and new interventions to better address their needs.

One recent research initiative involved examining how effectively DHS and school districts identify homeless students based upon the definitions that guide each of the systems.

School districts use the definition of the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act, which includes both homeless individuals/families and those who are in a housing crisis that puts them at risk of becoming homeless (such as living in a “doubled-up” situation in another’s home or living in an unsafe or unhealthy environment).

“These families often come to us,” said Kellie Irwin, a Woodland Hills School District (WHSD) social worker. “Maybe they can’t get their child to school, or I send them an attendance letter and the parent calls. Sometimes, the teacher reports that a child hasn’t been to school or is not as clean as usual. Most are identified because they call, often with a need other than housing. Then, while talking to them, they may say, ‘The water was shut off at our house, so we’re staying with my mom and we don’t know where the bus stop is.’ Or the grandma is in Penn Hills and the mom only had gas money to get the child to school for two days.”

DHS identifies homeless students when they enter a housing program (with their parent[s]) that is funded through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Under HUD’s definition, this funding is available only for individuals who are homeless, not those who are in a housing crisis (i.e., doubling up or in another precarious living situation) that may soon result in homelessness.

The lack of overlap between the definitions is evidenced by the fact that fewer than 10 percent of students identified by the Pittsburgh Public School District (PPS) as homeless were also identified by DHS. In WHSD, the overlap was only 15 percent.

These differences are particularly significant when considering the resources that would be required for DHS to provide services to all of the doubled-up families identified as homeless by the school districts. For example, a point-in-time snapshot of homeless student data during 2014 showed that, of the 115 students identified by WHSD as homeless, 107 (93 percent) were living in a doubled-up situation, as were 423 of the 621 students (68 percent) identified as homeless by PPS.

There are also many families who are active with DHS’s homelessness and housing support services but who are not identified by schools as homeless. The vast majority (74 percent) of PPS students being served by DHS’s homelessness and housing support services received support services, but not formal homelessness services, such as emergency shelter or transitional housing. While this may be an early warning sign of housing instability, neither system would actually identify them as homeless. In WHSD, support services involvement accounted for 70 percent of the students DHS identified as homeless.

BRIDGING THE GAP

Given the shared implications of the findings, it is not surprising that the partners have begun to explore collaborative ways to narrow the gap.

The Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU) has begun to use the shared data to report additional students who otherwise might have been missed. “Reporting matters to us,” said the AIU’s Nicole Anderson, who is a coordinator with the Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Program. “On the state level, our funding as a region is based on the number of children we identify. The more we identify, the more money we bring into the region to serve those children.”

For school districts, the information available through the shared data has informed decision-making about allocating limited resources and coordinating services to try to normalize the school experience for students in a housing crisis.

For DHS, having access to student data has allowed for earlier identification of students whose living situations are precarious, and for the ability to provide prevention and support services that can help them avoid the need to enter the formal homelessness system.

“The families you find in our emergency shelters are those who have nowhere else to go on any given night. But schools see the early signs — doubling-up can be the first living situation after they experience the crisis,” said Emily Kulick, manager of external partnerships in the DHS Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation. “The schools’ definition is more representative of families who are experiencing a housing crisis.”

For many of those families, a doubled-up situation is a temporary, safe harbor that enables them to work through their crisis and regain their independence. But for other families, it can be the first step in a deepening housing crisis that will eventually lead them to seek emergency shelter and additional services.

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“We don’t have the resources to serve all of the families who are doubled-up,” Kulick said. “So, we are trying to figure out how to assess and identify families who are most in need and support them earlier so that they don’t experience as much trauma.”

Development of such an assessment tool is a key component of an initiative between DHS and WHSD. The risk assessment will be designed to determine whether the family’s doubled-up situation is working, whether a student or family is at risk of deeper involvement in the homelessness system, and whether (and which) services are immediately needed to help stabilize housing to prevent circumstances from getting worse.

DHS is collaborating with WHSD on a broader community-based participatory research model to engage community stakeholders as a way to help close the gap in homeless student identification and design interventions to support them more effectively. Under the model, DHS is collaborating with school staff, community organizations, service providers, and students and families who have experienced housing crises to better understand, increase the awareness of, and meet the needs of the students facing the hardships of homelessness.

“What the community can do to help families resolve a housing crisis has been missing from the conversation,” said Murphy. “The schools need to feel supported, and we are trying to figure out how we can better support them.”

If proven effective, the pilot model will likely be expanded to other school districts.

“Working with kids in these kinds of disadvantaged situations is a priority as we move forward because the earlier and more effectively we can interact, the more likely we are to achieve successful outcomes,” said Alan Johnson, superintendent of WHSD. “It is a self-serving approach. We want to have kids in the classroom who are ready and interested in learning. If we don’t acknowledge all of the things that are happening to them outside of school, we are never going to be as good as we can be.”

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