



Homelessness and Education in Florida: Impacts on Children and Youth

Executive Summary

In the 2015-16 school year, 72,601 schoolchildren in Florida were identified as homeless. Under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, students identified as homeless include those who are temporarily doubled up with others or who are staying in hotels and motels, shelters, transitional housing, and unsheltered locations.

This report explores the impacts of housing instability on the education of children and youth in Florida by focusing on these students' experiences. Findings are based on student data provided by the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) and phone interviews with school district staff serving as McKinney-Vento homeless education liaisons from 29 counties throughout Florida.

Overview of Homelessness among Florida's Students

The number of Florida's schoolchildren identified as "homeless" grew from 33,889 in the 2007-08 school year to 72,601 in 2015-16. The increase reflects both the influence of the recent recession and foreclosure crisis and a concerted effort by school districts to train teachers, counselors, and other staff to identify students lacking permanent housing.

Most of Florida's students who were identified as homeless in 2015-16 (74 percent) were doubled up with family and friends. Eleven percent of homeless students were staying in hotels and motel rooms. A similar share (10 percent) were living in shelters and transitional housing, although these resources were very scarce in rural areas. Nearly 2,000 students were living in places not designed for human accommodation, including cars, parks, and campgrounds.

School district liaisons cited the lack of housing that low-income families could afford as a root cause of students' housing instability. Liaisons also cited complex economic and health circumstances that prevent parents from providing safe and stable housing. Chief among these were unemployment and underemployment stemming from low wages, lack of education and employment skills, and lack of reliable transportation.

In 2015-16, approximately one in ten homeless students was an unaccompanied youth (not in the custody of a parent or legal guardian). These youth are particularly vulnerable to victimization and exploitation, and they are at increased risk of developing physical and mental health problems. Few counties in Florida have shelters that can accommodate unaccompanied homeless youth.

Student Homelessness and Educational Outcomes

FDOE provided data on attendance, academic, and disciplinary indicators for three groups of students: those identified as homeless under the McKinney-Vento Act; students who were housed but were receiving free or reduced price lunch, a proxy for low-income status (“housed/free-reduced lunch”); and housed students eligible for full price lunch (“housed/full price lunch”). Across a series of measures, homeless students struggled compared to their housed peers.

First, absenteeism was more common among students identified as homeless. These students missed 15 days of school on average in 2015-16, compared to 11 days for housed/free-reduced lunch students and eight days for housed/full price lunch students. Eight percent of homeless students were identified as habitually truant (at least 15 unexcused absences within a 90-day period), compared to three percent of housed/free-reduced lunch students and two percent of housed/full price lunch students.

Second, homeless students were much less likely to demonstrate proficiency in academic subjects. Passing rates for Florida’s English Language Arts, math, and science tests were much lower for students identified as homeless than for housed students (see figure below).

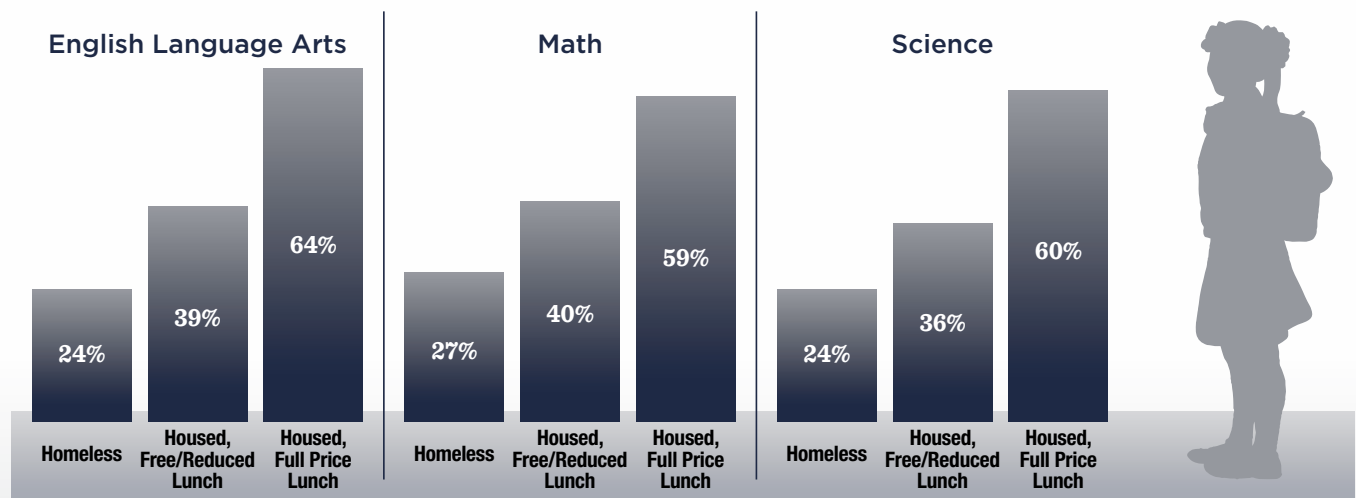
Third, homeless students were more likely to be subject to disciplinary action. In 2015-16, 16 percent of homeless students were suspended at least once, compared to 11 percent of housed/free-reduced lunch students and six percent of housed/full price lunch students.

The academic performance gaps between homeless students and their peers would likely be more significant without the wide array of services that schools provide under the McKinney-Vento Act. These services include:

- Immediate enrollment for students who have moved or have a gap in school registration due to homelessness.
- Transportation back to the school of origin if it is determined to be in the student’s best interest. School districts transport students to out-of-zone schools in a variety of ways, including extending bus routes or adding stops, providing transit passes to older students, buying gas cards for parents, or, when other options are not feasible, hiring private van services.
- Providing basic items students need to attend school, including hygiene kits, clothing, school supplies, and food.
- Providing financial assistance for extracurricular activities, field trips, and graduation costs to ensure that students can participate fully with their classes.

The school district liaisons report working closely with local organizations to refer homeless students and their families to available housing and services. Despite these strong connections, however, the liaisons report a lack of sufficient local housing and shelter resources to meet the housing needs of youth and families in their schools.

Students Passing FSA/SSA Tests as a Percentage of Grade-Eligible Students, 2015-16 School Year



Because of data availability, percentages refer to the number of students passing the test as a percentage of total students in the relevant grades, rather than as a percentage of students taking the test. Since some students did not take the tests, the percentages for all groups are lower than the actual passing rates of test takers.

Source: Florida Department of Education.

Policy Recommendations

The bulk of the policy recommendations focus on increasing the supply of safe rental housing that “extremely low-income families” (ELI) can afford. These are families whose income does not exceed 30 percent of the area median income (AMI). Increasing this housing supply will require maintaining and increasing funding for existing federal, state, and local housing programs, as well as developing new public-private partnerships. Recommendations include the following:

- Congress and the administration should restore and maintain the main federal programs that support housing in local communities, including the Housing Choice Voucher program, the Public Housing Capital Fund, the Community Development Block Grant, and the HOME Investment Partnerships Program.
- The Florida Legislature should appropriate all funds generated by the Sadowski Housing Trust Fund for housing programs each year.
- Local governments should set aside a portion of the Housing Trust Fund dollars they receive through the State Housing Incentives Partnership (SHIP) to assist ELI households through housing development and rental assistance.
- Florida must preserve its supply of housing with federal project-based rental assistance. Florida Housing Finance Corporation and local governments should incentivize or require set-asides of multifamily housing funds for preservation of these developments.
- The private sector and local governments should create loan funds and other types of dedicated housing trust funds in Florida communities, with a portion of funding targeted toward housing that ELI families can afford.

A second set of recommendations calls for assisting families with temporary financial support and other bridges to permanent housing. This includes implementing guidelines for local homelessness systems from recent reports by Barbara Poppe and Associates and the Central Florida Commission on Homelessness (*The Path Forward* and *The Current State of Family Homelessness in Central Florida*) and the Florida Housing Coalition (*Homeward Bound*). Their recommendations include developing local *coordinated entry systems*, through which households experiencing homelessness are quickly matched with services and providers appropriate to their needs; providing *rapid rehousing services* such as housing search counseling and financial assistance with deposits and rent; and providing *permanent supportive housing* for families facing chronic homelessness.

The report recommends additional ways to expand these types of bridge services to families not involved in formal homelessness systems. These include a recommendation that local governments devote the maximum allowable amount of SHIP funds to eviction prevention, security and utility deposit assistance, and rent subsidies. Another recommendation calls for community organizations and local housing trust funds to establish flexible funds to assist families with these expenses.

A third set of recommendations responds to liaisons’ concerns about issues outside of families’ immediate housing instability. First, the report encourages local foundations and charities to donate to schools’ assistance programs for students lacking permanent housing. These funds can be used to augment the limited federal funds available for basic needs such as clothing and food, and “extras” such as afterschool activities. Second, many county liaisons cited parents’ underemployment and lack of education and work skills as a root cause of families’ housing instability. The report describes a model program in Washington state that coordinates workforce and rapid rehousing services so that parents can begin working immediately to improve their earnings.

A final set of recommendations addresses alternative housing options for unaccompanied youth. Because of the legal limitations associated with housing minors, most recommendations address students who have reached age 18, but for whom independent housing would not be developmentally appropriate:

- Increase the number of youth-specific emergency shelter programs and allow for flexible time periods for shelter stay.
- Develop “Host Home” programs for unaccompanied youth, where youth age 18 and older are placed with a volunteer host family.
- Adopt successful transitional housing models for youth aging out of foster care to meet the needs of youth experiencing homelessness.

For minor youth, the report recommends increasing access to crisis shelter using federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act program funding and state funds for juvenile justice respite programs.

Contact:



Shimberg Center for Housing Studies
PO Box 115703
Gainesville, FL 32611-5703
(352) 273-1192
www.shimberg.ufl.edu



Miami Homes for All
140 W. Flagler Street, Suite 105
Miami, FL 33130
(786) 469-2060
www.miamihomesforall.org

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