Research Summary: Homelessness and Academic Achievement

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NCHE Research Publication

• Summary of the State of Research on the Relationship Between Homelessness and Academic Achievement Among School-Aged Children and Youth
• http://center.serve.org/nche/pr/research_pub.php
• Released in January 2012
• Provides an overview of research that studies the relationship between homelessness and academic achievement among school-aged children and youth in the United States
NCHE Research Publication

• More specifically...
  ➢ Provides context on child, youth, and family homelessness from the late 1980s to the present
  ➢ Summarizes policies and practices that link homeless students to educational supports and services
  ➢ Provides an overview of selected research studies that examine the relationship between homelessness and academic achievement
  ➢ Describes commonly utilized methodologies and challenges in conducting research on homeless and highly mobile populations
  ➢ Offers direction for further research

Today’s Session

• Overview of research
• History of research on homeless families and children
• Challenges in conducting research on homeless children, youth, and families
• Potential for more good quality studies
• Goals of and directions for future research
• Tips for becoming wise consumers of research
What kind of information is available to inform our work?

- Opinions
- Descriptions of and anecdotes about good practices
- Personal stories about working with children, youth, and families
- Research studies

Why read research?

- What will research provide that opinion articles, descriptions of good practices, or anecdotes do not? Research studies:
  - Conduct objective investigation
  - Examine data to support, refute, or explain something
  - Show the circumstances of what’s been tried and the results of the implementation
What is research?

• An approach to answering a research question that is:
  ➢ Empirical – based on collection of information
  ➢ Systematic – involves specific steps (identifying problem, reviewing literature, collecting data, analyzing data, and drawing conclusions)
  ➢ Valid – measures what it is intended to measure
    ☑ Internal validity – extent the result can be attributed to one and only one explanation
    ☑ External validity – ability to generalize results to a broader application or population

What is research? (cont)

➢ Reliable – extent to which results can be repeated
  ☑ Internal reliability – different measurements (e.g., observations, survey results, and interviews) produce same result
  ☑ External reliability – repeating the research design produces the same result
Research Terms

- Independent variable – what is changed by the researcher (e.g., types of tutoring programs)
- Dependent variable – what is measured (e.g., student achievement)
- Quantitative research – collects data in the form of numbers, e.g., test scores
- Qualitative research – collects data in the form of words by methods such as observations and interviews

Types of Research Studies

- Experimental - designed to identify cause-effect relationships between an independent variable and a dependent variable
- Descriptive - describes data and characteristics about the population or phenomenon being studied. Does not answer questions about how/when/why the characteristics occurred
Types of Research Studies (cont)

- Causal Comparative - uses two categorical groups (e.g., homeless and housed) to compare performance on a specific condition
- Correlational - only looks for relationship among variables (e.g., math ability and reading ability); no variables are categorical

Even when a relationship between variables is identified, we must first determine if extraneous variables were adequately controlled before concluding there is a cause and effect relationship.

Child, Youth, and Family Homelessness

- 1980s brought sharp increase in homeless numbers and a shift in the “profile” of U.S. homelessness
- U.S. GAO 1985 review of studies:
  - Annual rates of homelessness between 1980 and 1983 increase by between 10% and 38%
  - Homeless population expanding beyond substance abusers or “transients” including people who lost jobs or public assistance, lost housing as a result, and were unable to find a new (and affordable) place to live
- Shelters were reporting serving increasing numbers of families with children
- The growth of family homelessness has continued through the 1990s and 2000s
The Federal Government Responds

- 1980s: governmental responses to homelessness occurred mostly at the state and local levels; increasing homeless numbers put pressure on the federal government to respond.
- 1986: Homeless Person’s Survival Act
- 1987: Urgent Relief for the Homeless Act
- 1987: URHA renamed as the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act
- 2000: SBMHAA renamed as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act
- These acts funded a range of housing supports and authorized government’s first steps to address educational barriers for homeless students

Two waves of research

- First wave: mid-1980s thru 1991
  - First studies from mental health field described scope and dimension of crisis
  - Findings: higher grade retention, absenteeism, behavior and emotional problems, lower test scores
- Second wave: began around 1992
  - Sought to identify cause of academic problems in order to create strategies and resources
  - Documented negative effects of homelessness on academics when compared to general population
  - Found smaller differences when comparing homeless students’ academic performance to housed children living in poverty
2nd Wave of Research: A more detailed look

• “Broad, generalized statements about the impact of homelessness on children in the United states are problematic and, in some cases, misleading”
• Concept of a “risk continuum”

![Diagram showing the risk continuum between children in the general population, housed children living in poverty, and homeless children.]

2nd Wave of Research: A more detailed look

• Difficulty distinguishing definitively between the effects of poverty and homelessness
• Consider broader constellation of co-occurring risk factors associated with poverty:
  - Economic stressors
  - Parental job loss
  - Residential mobility
  - School mobility
  - Crowding
  - Hunger and poor nutrition
• Consider “cumulative risk”
2nd Wave of Research: A more detailed look

- Huntington, Buckner, and Bassuk (2008) examine whether there may be subgroups of homeless children with different patterns of functioning
- Discovered two subgroups of homeless students
  - Higher functioning despite stressors of homelessness
  - Lower functioning
- Evolution from “homogenous” view to “heterogeneous” view
  - Diverse subgroups of homeless students, each with unique traits and needs

2nd Wave of Research: A more detailed look

- Masten, et al. (1997)
  - Mediating factors affecting homeless students’ school success:
    - Quality of parenting
    - Support of other adults
    - Children’s cognitive skills
    - Children’s executive functioning
  - Even among homeless students with high risk factors, important variations exist
Research Challenges

• Difficulty obtaining significant and representative samples
  - Little research done on homeless students living in places other than shelters in large urban areas; easier to identify a substantial sample and collect data, but does not represent other homeless living arrangements or geographic areas
  - High mobility makes it difficult to maintain a statistically significant sample size, particularly for longitudinal studies; participants move, reducing the sample size and creating a selection bias of less-mobile students
  - Lack of longitudinal studies
    - Very little research that factors in a homeless student’s academic performance prior to becoming homeless
    - Very little research to examine how formerly homeless students fare after obtaining permanent housing

Research Challenges (cont)

• Lack of generalizability of studies
  - Studies are very context-specific, potentially reflecting:
    - The particular location of the study
    - Economic trends at the time
    - Local demographics
    - Availability of resources and support for homeless families
    - Local policies and practices
    - National policies related to homelessness at the time
  - Research studies are not generalizable beyond the location, time, and specific population studied
Variability within the population of homeless children and youth

- Most studies have treated homeless children, youth, and families as a homogenous population, not reflecting variability in areas such as:
  - Causes, frequency, and duration of homelessness
  - Mental and physical health
  - Past personal and academic experiences
  - Quality of parenting
- Little attention has been paid to subgroups of homeless children with different characteristics and patterns of functioning

Homelessness as a condition or marker

- Lack of consensus: Is homelessness a discrete condition that impacts children and youth’s academic achievement or a marker for a constellation of conditions (poverty, lack of stable housing, mobility, etc.)
- Studies may not have adequately measured and/or controlled for the effects of additional risk factors
Research Challenges (cont)

• Collecting quality data
  - Data collected from homeless shelters is impacted by the setting (noisy, chaotic, affecting performance on research instruments)
  - Many studies collected information via survey and interview; self-reported information is usually less reliable than information provided by normed tests

Potential for More Good Quality Studies

• Increased visibility and awareness
  - Increased attention to homelessness due to the economic and foreclosure crisis
  - Heightened awareness of and interest in homeless issues among the general public, federal agencies, and foundations
Potential for More Good Quality Studies (cont)

• Improvement in data quality
  ➢ SEA and LEA data systems and proficiency in data analysis are improving
  ➢ ED’s CSPR data requirements enable researchers to study larger samples encompassing multiple districts, states, and types of primary nighttime residences
  ➢ Use of unique student identifiers is becoming more widespread, enabling researchers to conduct longitudinal studies

Potential for More Good Quality Studies (cont)

• Increased collaboration on data collection
  ➢ Federal agencies (HUD, HHS, ED, etc.) are working to improve collaboration in data collection and sharing
  ➢ USICH Report to Congress: Community Forum to Discuss GAO Recommendation to Develop a Common Federal Vocabulary on Housing Status, at
Potential for More Good Quality Studies (cont)

• More nuanced research questions
  ➢ Generated by common themes in previous research
    ▶ Recognize diversity among homeless families, children, and youth
    ▶ Explore differences among subgroups: Why do some homeless children succeed despite challenges and barriers while others do not?
    ▶ Focus research on strengths rather than weaknesses
      • Why do some students excel academically?
      • What are interventions that create resilience in students despite challenges?

Goals of and Directions for Future Research

• Demand for studies on effective practice is increasing
  ➢ Need thorough understanding of population before developing educational theory and interventions
• Need to understand contextual and moderating influences that have led to inconsistent results across studies
  ➢ Large multi-site study would provide more comprehensive understanding of
    ▶ factors impacting lives of homeless children and youth
    ▶ homelessness in the context of other adversities
Goals and Directions for Future Research (cont)

• Study of what facilitates coping and adaptability will provide a more comprehensive picture
  ➢ Most studies have focused on deprivation, but many homeless students succeed in spite of the challenges
  ➢ More systematic efforts in gathering and applying evidence to examine the effects of policies and programs
  ➢ National conversation among researchers, educators, and policy makers to better understand homeless students and ways to increase their success in school

Wise Consumers of Research: Good Questions to Consider

• How old is the study? If it was before McKinney-Vento re-authorization, is it relevant?
• Is there a clearly stated hypothesis or research question that logically follows from the literature review?
• Does the background information/literature review refer to credible and relevant sources?
• Is a research design stated? Are subjects representative? Are the comparison groups appropriate?
• Do authors discuss correlational/cause limitations or cautions in their conclusions?
• Are the claims appropriate for the type of study?