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Knoll, Alison. (2021). Where They Live: Homelessness, School Location, and Academic Success. In *BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects*. Item 481. Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/481
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Where They Live: Homelessness, School Location, and Academic Success

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in Elementary Education

Bridgewater State University

May 4, 2021

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Abstract:

Where They Live: *Homelessness, School Location, and Academic Success*

The trauma and stress of homelessness on both children and their families can be devastating and damaging, especially to elementary school children. A teacher's understanding of the social emotional needs of housing insecure children is critical to their student's social emotional and academic well-being. This study will map the location of schools in major urban areas in Eastern Massachusetts and identify the homeless shelters, transitional homes, and community resources within the area. The purpose of this research is to make clear the relationship between a school's locations and the needs of the children they serve. This study will also provide in-service and preservice teachers with a resource so that they may educate themselves on the specific needs of their elementary age students who have housing insecurities. This study also focuses on how location contributes to a homeless student's access to success and how mapping the location of important services and public schools can contribute to a homeless student's success. With the knowledge that this study will provide, in-service and preservice teachers can create school experiences for homeless elementary students that are more positive and academically successful.

Introduction:

The psychological effects, trauma and stress, of homelessness on both elementary age children and their families can be devastating and damaging. Homelessness can impact a child's attendance, ability to pay attention and stay focused, and their self-confidence (Smart-Morstad, 2017). Homeless students struggle to pay attention in the classroom because of the numerous hardships they have to worry about in their life, like where they will sleep that night. Students are lucky if the homeless shelter they are living in is within walking distance to their school, but for students residing elsewhere or constantly changing residence, it is difficult to attend school. It was also difficult for the school to get in contact with parents or the students to keep them up to date on their work or to claim their things after they move. A homeless student has so many other things going on in their life, making it almost impossible for them to stay focused in school. They may be concerned about where they are going to sleep that night, when their next meal will be, if they will ever find a permanent home, or may be tired from sleeping on a floor the night before. Ordinary activities for housed children, like doing homework, bedtime reading, bath time, and family bonding moments are very difficult for homeless families to make happen. This leaves the child feeling even more isolated amongst his or her peers at school. The child's primary needs of food, shelter, and safety are not often being met, making the answer to a math problem the least of their priorities. All of these worries result in anxiety and anger for the child. (Smart-Morstad, 2017).

Often, families who are experiencing homelessness are unaware of the resources available to them within the area they are staying, or may be aware of some of the resources near them, but do not consider their child's school or teacher as a main communicator of these available resources. Often names of shelters or food pantries are spread through word of mouth

between families, but are not organized under one platform for families to reference (School House Connection, 2019). The creation of a map where multiple resources are presented is beneficial for both families experiencing homelessness and educators who have homeless students in their classroom. With the knowledge that this study has provided, educators, administration, and staff, can work towards making homeless elementary students experience in school more positive and impactful. The ultimate goal for my research is to help educators understand that wherever they work within the Boston and greater Boston areas, they will most likely work with students who are experiencing homelessness and to provide educators with resources and data that can support them in the classroom.

In order for educators to be able to identify students experiencing homelessness, it is important to understand how homelessness is defined. The McKinney-Vento Homelessness Act defines homeless children and youth as individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (NCHE, 2017). It is very common for teachers and staff to have stereotypical beliefs or misunderstandings toward children from diverse backgrounds, which includes a homeless student. They are often viewed as dysfunctional, unclean, lazy, criminally minded, socially irresponsible, and dangerous. This stereotypical belief can injure a homeless student's self-confidence and increase their anxiety and low self-esteem. Once educators are aware of the rights outlined under the McKinney-Vento Act and rid of any stereotypical beliefs they may have, they will then be able to use the interactive map as a resource to educate themselves and help the families in their classroom (School House Connection, 2019).

Literature Review:

There are more than 2.5 million U.S children who are homeless (Sullivan-Walker, 2017) and as of 2016, 40% of these children were living in a shelter before the age of seven (Haskett,

2016). In Massachusetts, the student homeless population in the state's public school districts rose by more than 3,000 between 2016 and 2018 to more than 23,000; an increase of almost 8% over the period of 2 years. In Massachusetts, Boston, Worcester, and Springfield have the most homeless students enrolled in their public schools (Lugli, 2020). In Boston, the location of elementary schools is well known and ample around the community. In the 89.63 mi² that makes up Boston, there are 82 elementary schools (Boston Public Schools: Focus on Children). As of 2019, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in Boston Schools was 56.5% (Dept. of Education, 2020).

The McKinney-Vento Act defines someone who is homeless as an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence (Mass. Dept. of Education, 2002). This includes living with a relative, in a shelter, motel, abandoned building, car, park, station, public place, or awaiting foster care placement. The McKinney-Vento Act also ensures that a homeless student has the same right to education as a housed student and is provided with transportation if needed, a liaison to help them with the enrollment process, and is freed of certain medical and state form requirements for enrollment. Although this Act was updated in 2002, there is still a lack of knowledge in educators about how to provide homeless students with the psychological help they need, which has ultimately limited them academically (Sosa, 2015).

School can be one of the best places for a homeless student to be because it provides them with security and routine, but unfortunately the negative psychological effects of homelessness such as anxiety and low self-esteem, result in a lack of school attendance. Alongside homelessness, it is common for children to also be experiencing trauma such as maltreatment, neglect, chronic illness, witnessing partner violence or substance abuse, and exposure to a family member who has depression (Smart-Morstad, 2017). According to Smart-

Morstad (2017), a reason for frequent and or long term absences is because homeless families are constantly changing their place of residence. The children often do not even get to say goodbye to their classmates or pick up their things from school when changing residence, resulting in few strong relationships and a lack of ownership of something. This makes the homeless child look at school as something of lesser value than it really is (Smart-Morstad, 2017). If the child does have a learning disability or is in need of extra help, it is impossible to help them if they never show up to school. Sixteen percent of students from homeless families miss more than three weeks of school each year. This can cause the student to stress over feeling behind, damage their academic growth, and promote anxiety because of a lack of routine; Overall, the instability and insecurity of being homeless results in a lack of attendance and impacts a student's view of the importance of school, academic achievement, accessibility to help, and social interactions; Public elementary schools are free to attend which allows for more children to attend them regardless of socioeconomic status, but still some family's factors of life impact their children's ability to attend elementary school and receive a quality education (Sulkowski, 2016). The awareness of locations of elementary schools is needed throughout the United States, thus why the creation of an easily accessible and navigational map of resources available to families experiencing homelessness is beneficial. The creation of a map with this criteria can help families easily find the location of the nearest schools in the Boston area.

It is important for educators to be able to identify signs of homelessness in their classroom before they can even provide students with the location of the resources they may need. Some common school related signs of homelessness among elementary aged students that teachers would have access to are: gaps in skill development, lack of or poor organizational skills, poor ability to conceptualize, lack of participation in after school activities, absences on

days when students bring in special treats or items from home, inability to contact parents, frequent missing or incomplete homework, lack of basic school supplies, and loss of books and other supplies on a regular basis. Some common school related signs of homelessness among elementary aged students that administration would have access to are: students are enrolled at multiple different schools prior to the current school they are at, lack of personal records needed to be enrolled at an elementary school as well as immunization records, and inability to pay any fees related to enrollment at a public school or any other activities like field trips. Some common signs of homelessness in relation to healthcare and well-being are, unmet medical and dental needs, respiratory problems and skin rashes, chronic hunger, hoarding of food, or enrolled in the free breakfast program, frequent fatigue or falling asleep in class, and numerous or extended periods of absences. Some common signs of homelessness in relation to social and emotional needs are, wearing the same clothes for several days in a row, inconsistent grooming, poor or short attention span, poor self-esteem, extreme shyness, unwillingness to risk forming relationships with teachers and fellow classmates, difficulty socializing at recess, difficulty trusting others, clinging behavior, fear of abandonment, need for immediate gratification, anxiety late in the school day, and mentions staying with grandparents, relatives, friends, or in a motel, ect (School House Connection, 2019).

A student experiencing homelessness may make comments such as:

- “I don’t remember the name of the last school.”
- “We’ve been moving around a lot.”
- “Our address is new. I don’t remember it.” (may hide lack of permanent address)
- “We’re staying with relatives until we get settled.”
- “We’re going through a bad time right now.”

- “We’ve been unpacking, traveling, etc.” to explain poor appearance and/or hygiene.

(School House Connection, 2019)

If an educator is aware of and able to identify these signs within their classroom in combination with familiarity with navigating the map, they will be able to act as a resource for homeless students and impact these student’s futures.

If a teacher is unaware of these signs and the available resources for students, it is common that the struggles a homeless student is facing will be overlooked by teachers, and instead teachers will deem students experiencing homelessness as misbehaved and academically declined. Fifteen out of sixteen homeless students drop out of school before graduating (Smart-Morstad, 2017) and less than one fourth of homeless youth graduate high school (Sulkowski, 2016). The McKinney-Vento act was developed to try to eliminate discrimination of homeless students by protecting their rights and ensuring they receive the same quality education as all other students, but when there is still a lack of support from not only fellow students, but faculty, a homeless student’s desire to continue in an unsupportive environment is very unlikely, thus they drop out (Sosa 2015). When the school becomes concerned about the success of the child, it is very difficult to contact a homeless student's parents or even the student themselves because most families do not have a reliable number they can be reached at. Even if the school wanted to try to help the student, provide them with services, or inform the parents of the students' performance in school, it is almost impossible to get in touch with them. This lack of communication between the school and guardians results in an even more defective support system and leaves the homeless student feeling hopeless and unmotivated.

In some rare cases, homeless students are able to overcome their struggle and have healthy self-esteem, a positive outlook on life, and an internal locus of control as a result of a

teacher's impact (Sulkowski, 2016). This is often made possible because the student has a strong relationship with a teacher or other school personnel that ultimately gives them the support system they have been missing their whole life. If school staff and teachers were more aware of how effective they can be in changing a homeless child's life, many more students could be experiencing resilience, but they are not well educated on the matter and often choose to ignore it because of how difficult the child's living situation is (Sulkowski, 2016). If a teacher is provided with a resource like a map, they will be able to inform families experiencing homelessness attending Boston schools of the available support in their area. Once students and their families have access to these resources, it is more likely that a housing insecure student will experience resilience. Although this map is of a small area in Massachusetts, it can create an awareness among educators of the importance of knowing the location of available resources for their students.

Methods:

This research began by reviewing published literature and the Department of Education's guidelines and facts on the effects of homelessness on elementary aged students as well as the effects of childhood trauma. Then, this research was extended to the connection between these hardships and educating "at-risk" children. A common theme was found of frequent absences and lack of resources at school in relation to these hardships and determined it would be important for both families and educators to be provided with a resource that would display the available resources for students experiencing homelessness as well as the location of public schools near these resources. As a geography major, a map felt to be the most fitting way to display this information.

The map was created on Google MyMaps because it is a user-friendly interactive platform that can be shared easily and widely. The locations of public schools within the Boston area were identified and statistics were retrieved on how many students are homeless in the Boston school district as a whole. The statistics on the number of homeless families attending a specific school were retrieved online using the data from the Boston school systems as a whole and from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). The city of Boston was chosen as the location of focus for research because it is somewhere that is close to home as well as it has a homeless population of 6,203 in 2019 and the percentage of economically disadvantaged students attending Boston schools is 56.5%. The percentage of economically disadvantaged students attending public state schools in Massachusetts is 36.6% (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). In addition to providing families with the locations of public schools closest to where they are staying, it was found that there were many other insecurities that many homeless families are facing in addition to homelessness and wanted to include these in my map for educators to consider. It was decided to include homeless shelters, food pantries, food banks, multicultural centers, boys and girls clubs, and community centers, in relation to the individual Boston Public Schools on my map. Each point on the map, when clicked on, displays a photo of the location, the address of the location, the phone number for the location, and any additional information like hours of operation or languages spoken. The homeless shelter points also include additional information like what type of occupants the shelter accommodates for (ex: women and children only, women only, or men only)

In addition to this map, *Community Resources for Families Experiencing Homelessness in the Greater Boston Area*, a website was created to store the map as well as important information for educators to turn to as a resource with questions. The website includes a section

on “Things I wish My Teacher Knew”, which explains the signs of homelessness, but from an elementary students point of view. A teachers’ resource page is also included that further lists signs of homelessness and how educators can identify them in their classroom, as well as facts about the homeless population in the United States and further websites to explore for more information. The ultimate goal for this research is to help educators understand that wherever they work within the Boston and greater Boston areas, they will most likely work with students who are experiencing homelessness and to provide educators with resources and data that can support them in the classroom.

Results/ Findings:

Through the process of creating my map, an obstacle was identified that would contribute to the accuracy of my map. Finding the exact location and address of homeless shelters is not always possible due to confidentiality and safety reasons implemented at these shelters. Many shelters choose to remain discreet and most information is only relayed through word of mouth for the safety of their occupants. It is important to note that this impacted the research and map data, as there are more likely additional homeless shelters in the Boston area than are plotted on my map.

In my own experience teaching in the classroom at a small, urban elementary school in Eastern Massachusetts, about 30 minutes South of Boston, I witnessed students struggle with hunger. This experience reassured me that my research and the product of my research would be beneficial to families in the area. It is not confirmed that any of these students in the class are currently experiencing homelessness, but the economic disadvantages of hunger, lack of supplies, and excessive absences that come alongside homelessness are present, making it a possibility. During my student teaching I have witnessed and continued to witness the impact of

hunger on students in the town. Most students receive both free breakfast and lunch from the school. For the current 2020-2021 school year they decided to make it free for everyone.

Overall, It was found that when all of the available community resources and public schools were displayed on a map, it was clear how abundant these resources were in the area. It is planned to share this resource with preservice and in service teachers within the Boston area to act as a resource for them and their students in the future.

Conclusion:

Even if a child lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, they should still have every right for access to a quality education. It is part of a teacher's role to provide a sense of comfort and security for the children in their classroom. Being informed about identifying the signs of homelessness and being familiar with the resources available to homeless families in the area is crucial for this part of the role. With this resource, preservice and inservice teachers will be able to build deeper connections with the community they serve and impact their students' futures in a positive way.

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