Washington Semester Program   Center for Interdisciplinary Studies

5-2023

Uplifting an Invisible Population: How We Can Combine Psychology and Policy to Improve the Educational and Mental Health Outcomes of Homeless Youth

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Recommended Citation

UPLIFTING AN INVISIBLE POPULATION

How We Can Combine Psychology and Policy to Improve the Educational

and Mental Health Outcomes of Homeless Youth

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Washington D.C. Semester Thesis

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May 2023

David grew up in a small village in Reserve, New Mexico (Soft White Underbelly, February 2020). He was raised by two adoptive parents who neglected him, hit him with thick metal boards, and failed to feed him. In an interview, David stated that he "used to drink piss out the bottle to survive." At 17 years old, David found his biological mother, who kicked him out of her home after a week when he caught her doing heroin. He was then homeless for seven months. About 700 miles west of David in Compton, California, seventeen-year-old Honey grew up with mentally, emotionally, physically, and sexually abusive parents (Soft White Underbelly, July 2020). She told an interviewer that "my father would touch me inappropriately when my mother wasn't there," and that "my mom would hit me upside my head." Soon after turning fourteen, Honey left home. At the time of the interview, she had been on the streets for three years. Kristina from Riverside, California moved from foster home to foster home from two years of age until she became homeless at twelve, at which point she joined a gang and started using methamphetamine (Soft White Underbelly, May 2020). When asked about her future by an interviewer, the sixteen-year-old responded that she "would probably be dead." She added that she has "called (her) parents a million times trying to beg them to come home," but "nobody cares about no one." The three interviewees attended a combined two years of high school.

Hidden Millions

The United States is home to hundreds of thousands of Davids, Honeys, and Kristinas. There are an estimated 1.7 million Americans under the age of 18 currently experiencing homelessness, and the vast majority of them credit their situation to escaping abusive and unsafe homes (SAMHSA, 2019). The number of youth, defined by the United Nations as individuals between the ages of 15 and 24, experiencing homelessness is even higher (United Nations, n.d.). In fact, the number of homeless youth in America is greater than the populations of Boston, New Orleans, and Las Vegas combined ("The 50 largest cities," 2015). It could fill Rungrado 1st of

May Stadium -the largest football stadium in the world- over eleven times (Ansari, 2022). Still, homeless youth tend to be grossly undercounted, and that 1.7 million does not account for those who have not sought help or cannot be tracked (SAMHSA, 2019).

Underidentification: It is common for youth experiencing homelessness to keep their status secret. In speaking about his time as a homeless youth, one individual stated that "I was too embarrassed to tell (the education system) about my homelessness" (Ingram et al., 2017). A local liaison concurred that, often, "we do not know about (homeless students') situations until a crisis occurs" (Ingram et al., 2017). According to the Managing Principal at Penn Hill Group, even when homeless youth are identified, it is often by school staff such as lunch attendants or janitors who just happen to witness suspicious behavior such as food hoarding (D. Petroshius, personal communication, March 14, 2023). Homelessness can feel embarrassing for many children who do not want to be made fun of by their peers or pitied by school staff (Davis, 2020). Shelly Lauten, CEO of the Central Florida Commission on Homelessness, reported that homeless children often "make an effort to fit in" and to exist as "part of the crowd" (Davis, 2020).

Even if no child was embarrassed or secretive about their homelessness, it would still be difficult to track the homeless youth population. Shahera Hyatt, director of the California Homeless Youth Project, argues that homeless youth tend to be a largely hidden population because oftentimes they are not located on the streets or in shelters (Wiltz, 2017). Instead, she noted that many youth "might have a place to sleep for the night, but they don't have a key, and they don't know how long they can stay." Homeless Youth Connection (2021) added that homeless youth often "tuck away on other people's couches or floors." It is also difficult to track homeless youth because various agencies maintain different definitions of homelessness. For example, the McKinney-Vento act defines homeless youth as individuals that lack a fixed,

regular, and adequate nighttime residence, whereas the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) defines homeless youth as those who cannot live in a safe environment (Wubbenhorst, 2018). Both of these definitions leave room for miscounts and underreporting as any one agency may interpret "safe," "fixed," or even "adequate" living arrangements in a number of different ways. In reality, there are far more homeless youth inhabiting the U.S. than have been reported.

Causes of Youth Homelessness

Household Conflict: David, Honey, and Kristina share one thing in common with many of the United States' homeless youth: they left home due to conflict in the household. The most common cause of homelessness among American youth is the desire to escape an abusive household, relationship, or foster home (SAMHSA, 2019). According to the National Network for Youth (2021), 90 percent of homeless youth report experiencing difficulties at home such as "fighting or screaming." The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that 46 percent of homeless youth run away from home because of physical abuse, and 17 percent because of sexual abuse (Bates, 2014). Further, many of the youth who cite familial conflict as their reason for becoming homeless also report running away from drug abuse in the home or being thrown out due to teenage pregnancy or their sexual orientation (Bates, 2014).

Youth that identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) are especially likely to become homeless due to familial conflict surrounding their sexual orientation (Coleman, 2010). LGBTQ individuals make up 20 to 40 percent of the homeless youth population, and have a 120 percent higher chance of experiencing homelessness than straight youth (National Network for Youth, 2022). They also endure higher levels of adversity than homeless youth who do not identify as LGBTQ. For example, 62 percent of LGBTQ homeless youth report being physically harmed compared to 47 percent of straight homeless youth (Morton et al., 2018). Further, 38 percent of LGTBQ homeless youth report being forced to have

sex compared to 15 percent of their straight counterparts (Morton et al., 2018). LGBTQ youth are also more likely to face discrimination when seeking alternative housing (Coleman, 2010).

It is not always conflict with parents that drives children out of their homes. Oftentimes, older teenagers and young adults become homeless after escaping a violent partner (Petering et al., 2014). The National Library of Medicine reports that 60 percent of homeless youth experienced physical violence in their most recent relationship, and 73 percent will experience partner-inflicted violence in their lifetime (Petering et al., 2014). Further, 22 to 57 percent of homeless women cite domestic violence as the cause of their homelessness (NNEDV, 2018). Overall, abuse is the primary cause of youth homelessness, but it is by no means the only one.

The Foster Care System: Many homeless youth cite aging out of the foster care system as the reason for their homelessness (SAMHSA, 2019). According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, 50 percent of the U.S. homeless population has spent time in foster care (Reyes, 2022). Due to the system's design, anyone still in foster care at the time of their eighteenth birthday is emancipated and released (NFYI, 2015). Many of these released youths get sent out on their own with very little or no money, no relatives to turn to, and no place to live (NFYI, 2015). One young woman told *Children's Rights* that she ran away because "my parents were drug addicts and my father abused me" (Daniels, 2015). When she was later placed in foster care, the same young woman recalled that several of her foster parents abused her and stole her clothes for their biological children. According to The National Network for Youth (2021), 12 to 36 percent of youth in the foster care system will age out and become homeless. An additional 66 percent of former foster youth report experiencing homelessness within six months of aging out (NFYI, 2015). That is *two-thirds* of the foster youth population experiencing homelessness, and additional factors like unaffordable housing and unemployment only exacerbate that crisis.

Economic Factors: Once homeless, many youth tend to remain unstably housed because of the affordable housing crisis in the United States (Ma, 2022). According to United Way NCA (2022), there are only two cities left in the U.S. (Buffalo, NY and Tucson, AZ) where minimum-wage workers can afford a one-bedroom rental by working under 50 hours per week. In many urban areas, minimum-wage workers need to work 80 or more hours per week to afford the same (United Way NCA, 2022). In San Diego, California, even average-wage workers have to work over 55 hours per week to afford a one-bedroom apartment (United Way NCA, 2022). In Washington D.C., minimum-wage workers must work a minimum of 78 hours per week to pay for even the most modest rentals, and in Orlando, Florida, they have to work a staggering 101 work hours per week to afford the same (United Way NCA, 2022).

High unemployment rates among homeless youth exacerbate the effects of the housing crisis (Slesnick et al., 2018). Roughly 75 percent of homeless youth report experiencing unemployment compared to 16 percent of the general youth population (Slesnick et al., 2018). This is due to the following factors: (a) Many jobs require employees to report a permanent address, (b) homeless youth have no reliable transportation or contact information, (c) homeless youth have limited access to showers and nice clothing for a job interview, (d) many homeless youth have criminal records that employers will not overlook, and (e) homeless youth have greater rates of mental and physical disabilities, which make it harder for them to pursue employment (Slesnick et al., 2018). Homeless youth also often find themselves leaning on survival behaviors to earn money (Slesnick et al., 2018). These include prostitution, selling blood, dealing drugs, or stealing. These activities, which are done out of desperation and hunger, only make it harder for youth to get hired as they can start or contribute to a criminal record.

Education and Mental Health Outcomes

Education: The Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness (2019) reports that less than 25 percent of homeless students are at grade-level in reading and math, and their performance tends to decline with time. Further, 2 in every 5 homeless children are labeled as chronically absent (National Center for Homeless Education, 2022). Chronic absenteeism occurs when a student misses at least 10 percent of the days they are supposed to be in school (National Center for Homeless Education, 2022). Homeless youth are often absent because they lack free and/or accessible transportation, have caretaking duties, fail to sleep due to volatile housing arrangements, suffer from chronic physical or mental health issues, or simply cannot think about school when they have much more basic needs to fulfill, such as hunger (ICPH, 2019). Both poor reading and math scores and chronic absenteeism are positively correlated to drop-out rates (National Center for Homeless Education, 2022). That is, the worse a student's scores are, and the more often they are absent, the more likely they are to drop out of high school.

During the 2018-2019 school year, only 16 percent of homeless students in Kentucky graduated from high school (Cai, 2021). In Washington D.C. and Minnesota, less than half of the homeless student population received a diploma the same year (Cai, 2021). Further, in 27 states, at least 1 in 3 homeless youth do not graduate from high school (Cai, 2021). While an estimated 84.1 percent of all youth in the United States obtain GEDs, only 64 percent of homeless youth do (Klein, 2019). This is devastating considering that individuals who do not obtain a high school degree have a 346 percent higher risk of experiencing or re-experiencing homelessness than those who hold a GED (Dukes, 2018). For reference, if you had a 346 percent higher risk of getting diagnosed with cancer than the average individual, you would go from having odds of 1 in 20 to nearly 1 in 5 (Roser & Ritchie, 2015).

When homeless students drop out of high school, they dramatically increase their chance of staying homeless. This means that they will have longer exposure to homelessness, which only increases their risk of engaging with or being exposed to dangers associated with that status. These include starvation, sexually assault, gang violence, taking or abusing drugs, committing suicide, commiting a crime, developing mental health disorders, and so it goes on (SAMHSA, 2019). Failing to graduate high school opens a revolving door to devastation for the majority of homeless youth, which is particularly frightening considering homeless youth are 87 percent more likely to drop out of school than their peers (SchoolHouse Connection, 2019).

Mental Health: In 2019, 33 percent of homeless youth attempted suicide compared to 2 percent of stably housed individuals (Gewirtz O'Brien et al., 2020). The same year, 61 percent of homeless youth reported self-harming compared to 13 percent of non-homeless youth, 52 percent of homeless youth experienced suicidal ideation compared to 10 percent of stably housed individuals, and 45 percent of homeless youth reported a depressed mood compared to 11.5 percent of their non-homeless peers (Gewirtz O'Brien et al., 2020). Liu et al (2022) found that homeless adolescents are far more likely to report feelings of hopelessness and planning suicide than their peers. They uncovered similar patterns for substance use. For example, 28 percent of homeless youths reported using heroin compared to 1.3 percent of stably housed youths.

Homeless youth develop mental disorders at higher rates and turn to substances more often than non-homeless students largely because of: a) psychiatric distress, b) exposure to adverse life events, c) trauma from childhood abuse, and d) challenges in accessing mental health care (Balasuriya et al, 2020). Trauma is a gateway to depression, anxiety disorders, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse, which is a problem for homeless youth who tend to bear significant trauma (Dugal et al, 2016). Take David, Honey, and Kristina for example. Between

the three of them, there is a complex history of mental, emotional, physical, and sexual trauma that has led them to drop out of school and live on the streets for extended periods of time. Kristina even believes herself to be nearing death (Soft White Underbelly, May 2020).

When mental illnesses are left untreated, the most common consequences include suicide, unemployment, unnecessary disability, substance abuse, incarceration, poor quality of life, and homelessness (NAMIC, 2021). For homeless youth that are already vulnerable to those risks, experiencing a mental health disorder is especially crippling. Just as dropping out of high school increases the chance of a homeless person staying homeless, sustaining an untreated mental health condition decreases homeless youths' chance of escaping their situation (NAMIC, 2021).

Moving Forward: How Do We Help?

A More Comprehensive Intervention: Despite efforts the U.S. government and other agencies have made to mitigate the education and mental health risks of homeless youth, there are still nearly 2 million youth in our country stuck with no permanent place to live (SAMHSA, 2019). There needs to be a better solution in place that works to not only improve the educational and mental health outcomes of homeless youth, but also ensure that the largest possible amount of homeless youth are being helped. The following paper argues that schools should be required and resourced to better inform *all* students about homeless student rights, and gives evidence-based suggestions as to how schools should facilitate connecting at-risk and homeless students with, or creating new, intervention programs that mitigate education and mental health risks.

Methodology: A comparative analysis was conducted with the goal of proposing a comprehensive intervention model that has the potential to reduce the educational and mental health risks homeless students face. Prominent theories in both the psychology and political science fields that pertain to student homelessness and the mental health and educational risks it creates have been synthesized. The McKinney-Vento act has been criticized and analyzed

alongside two psychological theories, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Self Determination theory. Existing interventions proposed by policy experts and psychologists were then explained and integrated with the aforementioned theories in order to propose guidelines that maximize the chances of improving outcomes for homeless students.

<div align="center">**Psychological Theories: What Youth Need to Thrive**</div>

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Anyone who has ever taken a test on an empty stomach knows that hunger can hinder concentration. For homeless youth, hunger is common and often lasts extended periods of time (House Committee on Rules, 2021). Food insecurity, which is defined by Ke and Ford-Jones (2015) as the lack of nutritious foods in sufficient quantities to maintain good health, is inexplicably linked to homelessness. Barbara Duffield, the Executive Director of SchoolHouse Connection, argues that homeless youth often stay hungry to save money for clothes or shelter (House Committee on Rules, 2021). She added that, once homeless, accessing food becomes more difficult and, often, children will eat insufficient amounts or not at all to keep themselves from being kicked out of temporary housing situations. Research suggests that extended hunger is correlated with increased stress, worry, and depression (Sharma & Carr, 2017). Further, Sharma and Carr (2017) found that food insecurity adversely impacts student learning outcomes, and Ke and Ford-Jones (2015) reported that children from food-insecure households were two times more likely to experience persistent hyperactivity and inattention than other children. Abraham Maslow, psychologist and father of Hierarchy of Needs Theory, would argue that this hunger is one of the primary reasons homeless children are dropping out of school and developing mental health issues at such high rates (Block, 2011).

Maslow argued that people need their immediate biological needs satisfied before they can desire to fulfillment of other, more abstract needs such as finding a spouse (Kremer & Hammond, 2013). His "Hierarchy of Needs" theory argues that there are five levels of needs

humans have, ranging from essentials like food and water to abstract qualities such as creativity (Block, 2011). One cannot strive to fulfill an upper-level need until needs in previous levels are met. For example, one cannot desire respect if they do not first have intimate relationships. Once needs in one level are met, an individual will naturally start desiring needs in the next level.

The levels of needs, in order from most to least immediate, include: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. The first physiological level encompasses biological needs such as food, water, and warmth (Block, 2011). One cannot prioritize the fulfillment of needs on the safety level, including security and stability, if they are hungry. The love and belonging level houses relational needs such as meaningful connections to family and friends, while the esteem level includes recognition, mastery, and achievement. The highest level consists of self-actualization needs such as fulfillment and acceptance. It is logical that each level can only be reached if the needs on the previous level are satisfied as people naturally prioritize their most immediate needs. A lack of food or shelter kills quicker than a lack of connection or respect.

A Caveat: Self-Determination Theory: Since its proposal in 1943, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has faced criticism. The most common complaint about the theory is that the order of the needs is more arbitrary than Maslow first conceived (Henwood et al, 2016). For example, a particularly narcissistic person could prioritize an esteem need like achievement over relationships with friends, even though the latter is categorized as a more immediate need. Further, the levels of needs in Maslow's theory are fairly broad, and there are no explanations as to why certain needs, like those for relationships, are important. Other theories of motivation have been introduced to fill in some of the gaps Maslow's theory left. Self-determination theory, for example, is a complementary theory that suggests people are most motivated to succeed in a

Figure 1 (The Interaction Design

given environment when they feel competent, autonomous, and a sense of relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). All three attributes are key in optimizing the chance a person has to succeed, and when they are supported, people are likely to feel better overall and persist through challenges (University of Rochester Medical Center, N.D). Afterall, when one feels incompetent, they are likely to grow frustrated and give up on their task. When one feels no sense of autonomy, they have no drive to go after what they desire. When one does not feel a sense of relatedness or connection with others, they struggle to feel supported and are more likely to lack motivation.

When combined with Maslow's theory, self-determination theory would argue that once basic biological and safety needs are satisfied, not only must higher level needs like esteem and self-actualization be reached, but people must also feel as though they are skilled at what they are doing (competent), they have a choice and voice in what they are doing (autonomous), and they belong and are connected to people around them (relatedness) in order to thrive. This is the psychological framework that will be used for the rest of this paper.

Psychology and Policy Come Together: Why Homeless Youth Are Falling Behind

Hierarchy of Needs and Self-Determination Theory: There are 1.7 million homeless youth in the U.S. at heightened risk for dropping out of school and developing mental health disorders (SAMHSA, 2019). Hierarchy of Needs theory and Self-Determination theory posit that this is because homeless youth often experience food and shelter insecurity, which makes it impossible for them to care about competence, self-esteem, and grades in school. Even homeless children in the most stable housing and food conditions possible (for example, staying at a reliable friend's home) will have tremendous difficulty thriving in a school environment if they do not feel competent, autonomous, and connected to others.

Peixoto et al (2017) found that children who perceive themselves as competent are more likely to experience positive emotions, and Domitrovich et al (2017) reported that social-

emotional competence is strongly related to social, behavioral, and academic outcomes that lead to healthy development. It is difficult for someone to feel competent when they cannot focus because they are starving, miss lessons because of chronic absenteeism, or fail exams because they have no resources to study (Domitrovich et al, 2017). Vasquez et al (2016) found that children who are able to explore their autonomy report greater academic achievement, psychological health, engagement, and positive attitudes toward school. Autonomy, in this case, extends beyond just independence. To truly experience a sense of autonomy, youth must feel as though they have meaningful control over their life's direction and the decisions they can make (Deci & Ryan, 2017). How can homeless youth feel as though they have meaningful control over their lives when they have been forced out of their homes, have to scrounge for methods to support themselves, and the majority have been assaulted (Edmondson Bauer et al, N.D.)?

Finally, Lee (2012) found that children who have a supportive relationship with a teacher are likely to succeed in reading and be behaviorally and emotionally engaged. Gasevic et al (2013) discovered that students with more social capital have higher academic performance, and Wang and Eccles (2012) found that peer support predicted both adolescents' school compliance and how much students identified with their school. It is difficult for homeless students to feel a sense of relatedness with teachers and peers when they feel socially isolated due to their circumstances, feel embarrassed about their situation, and have remarkably low attendance.

According to Krabbenborg et al (2016), the environment an individual operates in is key to whether or not they will feel competent, autonomous, and a sense of relatedness. People are at a significant disadvantage if they live or spend a substantial amount of time in environments that make attaining those three attributes difficult. This is the case for many homeless youth, who as previously mentioned, have often been abused or rejected by the people closest to them, have no

control over the situation they find themselves in, and are incredibly limited in the decisions they can make. Matthew, a homeless 23-year-old, told Komo News, "I didn't do anything wrong for me to be out here, it just happened" (Burnside, 2015). This is common for homeless youth who are often thrown out or leave home because they feel as though they have no other choice.

The McKinney-Vento act: The U.S. government's involvement in supporting homeless youth just about begins and ends with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance act, which was introduced in 1987 and has remained the law of the land since (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance act, 2000). The act promises equal access to free public education, transportation services, and meals to all homeless students (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance act, 2000). It also grants students the right to stay at the same school despite relocating, allows schools to waive requirements like vaccination records, and ensures each school district employs a liaison specifically to assist homeless students (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance act, 2000). The liaison, among other duties, is responsible for posting information about the rights homeless youth have to an education in places where it will be seen by those homeless families and children (Canfield et al, 2012). The McKinney-Vento act also requires all schools to identify and count students experiencing homelessness and report them to their district liaison (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance act, 2000). The act provides a broad definition of homeless youth, including all students who lack a "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance act, 2000). Funding for the act is designed to help schools provide tutors, school supplies, and transportation services to homeless youth, as well as specialized training for teachers (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance act, 2000).

Despite the passing of the McKinney-Vento act, there are still millions of American students dropping out of school and attempting suicide at least in part due to their homelessness

(SAMHSA, 2019). The problem is not the lack of an appropriate policy, but rather the failure to implement the one that exists. In his critical ethnography, Cunningham (2014) interviewed the principal of a large Central Texas public school as well as district homeless liaisons. The principal reported that anything he knew about the act, he learned in a "reactive and self-directed" manner. He even joked that the only time he has contact with the State about the McKinney-Vento act is "if we do something wrong." One homeless-support liaison stated that little monitoring would have made it easy to "simply sit at her desk and collect a paycheck." In their survey, Mullins et al (2016) found that 37 percent of district homeless liaisons interacted with homeless students "never" or "seldom." Another study (Shea et al, 2010) revealed that 92 percent of participating liaisons spent less than 25 percent of their time on McKinney-Vento related responsibilities, and Thompson and Davis (2003) discovered that a significant amount of district liaisons do not even know that they have been assigned as the district homeless liaison.

It is clear that no higher state or Federal authorities are proactively enforcing the McKinney-Vento act to school and district staff. It does not end there, however. Beth Peterson, for example, lost her apartment and was forced to house her son among relatives and friends while she transferred between hotels (DiPierro & Mitchell, 2022). She spent months' worth of money she did not have paying acquaintances to take her son to school because she was unaware of his right to free transportation under the McKinney-Vento act. Michael Carr, the Public Policy Coordinator and an advocate for children's rights at PACER, stated that the families he works with rarely report knowledge of the McKinney-Vento act (M. Carr, personal communication, April 14, 2023). Further, many of the homeless youth that participated in a focus group held by Wynne et al (2014) said that they had never heard of the act. Wynne et al (2014) also found that parents who could benefit from the McKinney-Vento act generally do not have the knowledge,

financial capacity, or skills to advocate for their children. If McKinney-Vento knowledge and implementation do not reach school administrations, there is virtually no way they will reach families on the verge of -or in the midst of- homelessness. In fact, the National Network for Homeless Youth (2008) reports that homeless youth often do not know the full extent of their rights to receive an education, and a fact sheet on the McKinney-Vento act reads "Indeed, most families and youth are likely unaware of the McKinney-Vento act" ("act of kindness", 2013).

Putting Things Together: If the McKinney-Vento act had a perfect enforcement mechanism and was implemented according to design, homeless youth would be much more likely to graduate high school and have better mental health. They would have free school meals, drinking water, and guaranteed shelter for at least six hours a day, which would help satisfy needs for safety and food. Under the McKinney-Vento act, Local Education Agencies are required to provide free transportation to and from a student's school of origin, an act that would directly improve school attendance for homeless youth that credit their absences to transportation difficulties (Education Law Center, 2020). Since students with higher attendance perform better academically than those with low attendance, that free transportation would improve academic achievement (Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014). Since high absenteeism is also a precursor to dropping out of school in many cases, transportation services would also help keep students in school for longer and give them a better chance at graduating, both of which are associated with better long-term well-being and economic success (Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014).

Being in school for more days out of the school year gives students more time to understand material, make more decisions, and form better relationships, all of which would improve their senses of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. However, the sad reality is that there has been an utter lack of follow-through and weak implementation of the McKinney-Vento

act. More proper implementation and education about the act is critical in helping homeless

students better their educational and mental health outcomes.

Analyzing Existing Interventions

As youth homelessness has increased in scope and consequently garnered more attention,

a variety of intervention programs have surfaced to meet the demand for support and outcome

improvement. Several researchers have completed systematic reviews of existing intervention

models, which range from increasing the number of school counselors to employment assistance

initiatives. Three separate reviews found that most intervention models for homeless youth fall

into the following categories: homelessness prevention, family strengthening, housing programs,

individual counseling and treatment, mentorship, employment programs, and connection to

homelessness services (Morten et al., 2020; Detlaff et al., 2017; & Altena et al, 2010). The

following section will analyze the effectiveness of each type of intervention.

Homelessness Prevention: Homeless youth would not need help improving their

educational and mental health outcomes if they were not homeless in the first place. Such is the

idea behind initiatives like the "Opening Doors" program. "Opening Doors" is a Federal

initiative designed to prevent youth homelessness by identifying at-risk families and students and

intervening before they become homelessness (Interagency Working Group on Ending Youth

Homelessness, 2022). The program relies on Federal, state and local partners working together to

identify students that could be at risk for homelessness based on factors such as family problems,

economic circumstances, racial disparities, and mental health and substance use disorders.

Partners are also expected to pay close attention to students that fall into groups with a

disproportionate risk for experiencing homelessness, such as youth who identify as LGBTQ,

youth with special needs, and pregnant youth. Once at-risk youth are identified, partners are

supposed to connect them with trauma-informed, culturally appropriate, and developmentally

and age-appropriate interventions. Such interventions can include family therapy, emergency service administration, and housing support. Another example of a preventive intervention is Larkin Street Youth Services, a San Francisco-based non-profit organization that focuses on taking action against the root causes of youth homelessness (Halton & Yazzie, 2021). Through the provision of an array of services ranging from emergency shelters and drop-in centers to medical services and housing, Larkin Street claims to "help remove barriers, provide stability, promote health and wellness practices, and nurture social connection" for at-risk youth. They also advocate for the training and funding of local education agencies so they can be better equipped to identify and support at-risk youth and families.

The best way to ensure that youth are not suffering the consequences of homelessness is to prevent them from ever becoming homeless in the first place. However, preventative measures fail to account for the millions of youth who are *already* homeless. Prevention strategies are not helpful for individuals like David, Honey, and Kristina who have been on the streets for months if not years and continue to suffer because of it. Further, as previously established, homeless youth are a difficult population to track. Many keep their status secret to avoid embarrassment or judgment, and others are difficult to identify because they are couch-surfing rather than living on the streets or in shelters (Davis, 2020 & Wiltz, 2017). As it stands, one cannot reliably count on the proper identification of at-risk students to prevent youth homelessness. While prevention efforts are important and valuable, they alone are not sufficient to fight the homeless youth crisis.

Family Strengthening: Considering that the majority of homeless youth ascribe their situation to household conflict, it is unsurprising that a number of researchers center intervention efforts around counseling families. Afterall, familial connection is a protective factor for homeless youth (Kelly, 2019). An example of a family strengthening intervention is Ecologically

Based Family Therapy (EBFT), a mode of therapy designed to change family patterns that contribute to youth homelessness through a series of therapeutic sessions with the youth and their caregivers. Ecologically Based Family Therapists help family units reframe, relabel, and reinterpret their relationships through communication skills and conflict resolution training (Slesnick, 2021). Zhang & Slesnick (2017) found that caregivers who received EBFT showed a decline in depressive symptoms, and Slesnick & Prestopnik (2005) identified a correlation between EBFT and reduced drug use in runaway youth. Likewise, Treatment Foster Care Oregon (TFCO) is a family-centered therapy service for adolescents in foster care (Treatment Foster Care Oregon, n.d.). It provides therapy sessions to foster youth conducted by trained therapists, foster parents, biological family members, and case managers. The goal of the program is to provide a supportive environment and a network of trusted individuals for vulnerable youth (Pergamit et al, 2016). Morton et al. (2020) found that family strengthening interventions like EBFT and TFCO were related to improved outcomes in homeless youth well-being and behavioral health, but were unable to identify any direct effects on reducing youth homelessness.

There is a fundamental problem with improving the outcomes of homeless youth by intervening in their families: Most ran away for a reason. Homeless children often flee their homes because of a family member's abuse (SAMHSA, 2019). Many others have been kicked out of their homes because of factors like their sexuality or pregnancy (Bates, 2014). In some cases families may be willing to change their behaviors to bring their child home, but that does not negate the fact that many children willingly choose housing instability and hunger over staying with their families because they wished so strongly to escape from them. In other cases, families do not want to associate with or support their homeless child at all, such as in the case of extreme homophobia (Bates, 2014). With many homeless youth crediting their situation to

conflict in the household, it would seem that family-based interventions are too scarcely

applicable to act as a reliable intervention for improving the outcomes of homeless youth.

Housing Programs: If any layman was asked to propose an intervention for helping

homeless youth, it is likely that they would include some form of housing support. Afterall, the

very word "homelessness" indicates that the primary problem for these youth is their lack of a

home. The Housing First model, as well as transitional housing programs, are intervention

strategies founded on this idea. Both programs operate according to the belief that providing

housing to youth is crucial for mitigating the risks of homelessness (Brakenhoff et al., 2022). The

Housing First model was designed to give homeless people immediate access to independent

apartments and supportive services without any prerequisites for sobriety or psychiatric

treatment (Brakenhoff et al., 2022). It provides short-term rental assistance and services to

homeless youth with the goal of helping them become more self-sufficient and stably housed

(National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2022). Housing First advocates and organizations

provide homeless individuals with rent and move-in assistance, as well as help them access key

services such as mental health and food support until they are able to get back on their feet

(National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2022). Founders of Housing First believed that housing

is a fundamental right, and that consumers should have a choice as to where and how they live.

Transitional housing, defined by Pierce et al (2018) as a program designed to help

homeless youth transition to permanent housing by providing short-term housing, is another

common housing support intervention. Transition housing is funded by the Family and Youth

Services Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Pierce et al., 2018). It

provides free, temporary housing to homeless youth between 16 and 22 years old. For example,

Daybreak is a transitional housing program in Ohio that places clients in on-site apartments and

proceeds to move them to off-site housing as they gain skills and independence (Pierce et al., 2018). Daybreak helps clients pay rent, but slowly decreases the amount of assistance as the youth become more financially stable. Transitional housing programs focus on decreasing the amount of support they give clients over time so as to incentivize self-sufficiency.

One of the major issues with housing support programs is that youth can only be placed in housing complexes that have agreed to work with advocates and welcome homeless youth, which means that the pool of options is limited (Brakenhoff et al., 2022). That pool becomes even smaller when some agencies turn down clients who have a poor rental history and/or a criminal record (Brakenhoff et al., 2022). Further, because they are Federally funded, transitional housing programs have restrictions, including a rule that they are only allowed to support youth who were previously in shelters or on the street (Pierce et al., 2018). Homeless youth are often described as an invisible population because so many *do not* live on the streets or in shelters. That criteria discounts the large number of homeless youth that are staying with friends, sleeping in motels, or couch-surfing (Wiltz, 2017). Further, providing homeless youth with housing support does not directly address the mental, physical, or sexual trauma most have faced, nor does it connect them with opportunities for income or education. Both are protective factors that could help prevent them from returning to homelessness later in life (Kelly, 2019).

Individual Counseling and Treatment: If homelessness among youth cannot be immediately prevented and housing cannot be instantly provided, then there needs to be serious attention given to programs that try to mitigate the effects of youth homelessness while it is happening. Morton et al (2020) describe individual counseling and treatment as a non-family-based intervention focused on delivering therapeutic services to homeless youth. This type of intervention generally focuses on improving the mental health and reducing the risky behaviors

of homeless youth. For example, in their longitudinal clinical trial, Slesnick et al (2020) recruited 150 homeless youth from a Midwestern drop-in center and administered Cognitive Therapy for Suicide Prevention. They found that youth who received therapy were more likely than the control group to report high levels of social problem-solving, low levels of perceived burdensomeness, and low levels of suicidal ideation three, six, and nine months after the intervention. Likewise, Bender et al (2016) spent three days at a shelter administering counseling, group discussions, and experiential exercises. Groups talked about risks associated with prior experiences of violence or abuse, the concept of mindfulness, problem solving, and asking for help. The primary finding was that, after three days, youth in the intervention group showed improvements in risk detection abilities as compared to peers in the control group.

Ample research demonstrates that students who receive mental and behavioral health support not only show higher academic achievement, but also improved classroom behavior, engagement, relationships, and well-being (National Association of School Psychologists, 2021). Improving mindfulness and offering mental health support to homeless youth, then, seem inherently beneficial. However, Winiarski et al (2020) collected data on homeless youth who attended their shelter-based mental health clinic from 2016 to 2018 and found incredibly low retention rates. That is, the majority of homeless youth who attended the first session did not attend the second. Bender et al (2018) likewise reported that the majority of homeless youth in their study hesitated or outright declined to access mental health services. The participants largely credited that hesitation to negative experiences seeking help in the past, which caused a distrust to develop towards mental health services and professionals. More specifically, homeless youth reported that they feared mental health professionals would betray their trust and spread

information about their status to others. Other participants stated that they feared they would be judged by peers and/or the professional, or be provided with "no meaningful service."

Evidently, homeless students, whether it be because they are embarrassed or unknowing of services, are not running to counselors and mental health service providers. Further, two studies found that simply providing youth with access to treatment services did not reduce high-risk behavior long-term (Das et al., 2026 & Winiarski et al, 2020). Youth need more than mental health support to thrive, and combined with the hesitation homeless youth seem to have toward accessing mental health services, that certainly presents a challenge for a counseling and treatment intervention approach. There also need to be methods of building trust between mental health professionals and homeless youth, as well as attention and investment into the root causes of mental health problems among homeless youth, which often include family conflict and housing instability. A mental health based approach, like a housing support approach, is not sufficient on its own to combat the negative consequences of homelessness on youth.

Mentorship: Given that many homeless youth are estranged from their parents and show a hesitation to trust mental health professionals, several researchers have looked into other ways relationships can be fostered between homeless youth and adult role models. One of the most prominent intervention strategies that has surfaced is the mentorship model. Having a mentor is associated with lower odds of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts for mentees (Aguayo et al., 2021). It is also correlated to an increased sense of perceived belonging in the school community (VanWeelden et al., 2017), a lower chance of developing depression (Lee et al., 2021), and higher confidence (Grossman & Tierney, 1998). For homeless youth specifically, Bartle-Haring et al (2012) found that mentorship was associated with reduced substance abuse, decreased depressive symptoms, and fewer internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

Bridges to Independence is Virginia-based organization that connects youth in homeless shelters with adult mentors who help them improve their academic skills, self-esteem, job readiness, and well-being (Bridges to Independence, 2023). One participant claimed that the mentorship program "helped (them) achieve (their) goal of successfully applying to colleges," which they explained was not something they would have been motivated to do on their own (Bridges to Independence, 2020). Four states over in Evanston, Illinois, *Connections for the Homeless* runs a mentorship program that has volunteers meeting with homeless youth each week to build trust and model healthy relationships (Connections for the Homeless, 2018). In one *Connections for the Homeless* program, Mary Pat, a volunteer mentor, cooks and eats dinner with six homeless shelter residents each week (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2018). Mary Pat spends her time in the kitchen and at the table encouraging the youth to discuss their interests and guide each other. Youth Programs Manager Thalma Brooms reported that the residents are excited to see Mary Pat each week, and that it is her consistency that helps them understand what a healthy, supportive relationship looks like (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2018).

Another example of a mentoring program designed to help homeless youth is Valley Youth House's Pennsylvania-based AMPLIFY program (Stanford, 2023). The intervention is designed to "pair dynamic, caring adults in the community" with youth in foster care. AMPLIFY helps youth in foster care aged 14 to 21 with the transition into adulthood. It focuses on helping youth build relationships with adult volunteers who can then help them navigate social, housing, education and employment goals. Considering that more than one third of youth in foster care become homeless once they age out of the system, intervening with mentorship while they are still in care serves as a preventative measure for homelessness (NFYI, 2015). The idea is that, if

foster youth build connections and learn about how to live independently before exiting the system, they will be less likely to experience homelessness once emancipated (Stanford, 2023).

Mentorship programs come with a host of benefits for mentees, but there is one key caveat: They need to be good programs with quality mentors. Not all mentorship programs are successful, and for homeless youth that often struggle with trusting others, another poor connection could be detrimental to their ability and willingness to confide in others (Menjivar, n.d.). The American Psychology Association found that 67 percent of surveyed mentees believed their mentor-mentee relationship was strained at one point or another by factors such as personality clashes, different working styles or expectations, a lack of encouragement, excessive criticism, or miscommunication (Chamberlin, 2005). Some youth continue to see a mentor even if they feel as though they are not a good match because they feel "locked into the relationship" and believe switching mentors would hurt the feelings of their mentor (Chamberlin, 2005). Further, Rodríguez-Planas (2014) found that mentorship programs tend to improve youth's self-esteem and social skills more than their academic performance. Improvements in academic performance are crucial for homeless youth to graduate high school and improve their outcome forecast, so either mentorship programs need to be adjusted to target academic success or youth need more than a quality mentorship to succeed in school and beyond (Dukes, 2018).

Employment Programs: Solely looking at housing support, counseling, and relationship-based interventions for homeless youth ignores one reality: People need money to survive. Mentorship and counseling programs do not provide youth with a roof over their heads, and housing programs only provide temporary assistance. It is crucial for youth wanting to escape homelessness to access a stream of income. That is the goal of organizations such as *Friendship Place*, a group based in Washington D.C. that targets homeless young adults and connects them

with employment opportunities (Friendship Place, 2023). Their AimHire program assesses the skills and interests of homeless youth and gives them access to the services they need to make the job-searching process easier. AimHire professionals are trained to identify barriers to employment, which include incarceration, criminal records and substance abuse, and find accommodations that participants need. Volunteers for AimHire not only provide one-to-one mentoring on job readiness topics such as resume writing, but also help create job opportunities by reaching out to employers in the community. In 2021, *Friendship Place* connected 246 participants with jobs averaging an hourly pay rate of $16.20 (Friendship Place, 2021).

A variety of career pathway platforms exist online that provide users free access to job and skills training, and sometimes guaranteed interviews with employers and apprenticeships (D. Philps, Personal Communication, April 3, 2023). Job Corps, for example, is a program run by the U.S. Department of Labor that provides people aged 16 to 24 with an opportunity to complete their high school degree and access technical education (JobCorps, 2023). Successful graduates are guided into employment, the military, an apprenticeship, or higher education. *Generation* is a nonprofit that provides free job training and placement certifications to people seeking help with employment (Generation USA, 2023). It served over 12,000 people in 2021 and aims to train 500,000 individuals by 2030 (Generation USA, 2023). There are many other online platforms that provide free or low-cost training to youth that can help them better appeal to employers and qualify for positions. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development is home to a Homeless Assistance Program that lists all job and training opportunities for homeless individuals by the state they reside in (SAMHSA, 2023). Homeless youth would need to have access to the internet or contact their local district liaison to access the list.

Several challenges present themselves in regard to employment-based interventions. First, many platforms for accessing employment exist online, which makes them innately difficult to access for the many homeless youth who do not have access to stable wifi or internet devices (VanHoltz et al., 2018). Second, employment is not an option for youth who are protected by child labor laws. In most states, children under the age of 14 cannot apply for a minimum wage job and even if they can, they can only work a limited number of hours until they turn 16 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). Third, as previously mentioned, many employers will overlook homeless youth due to factors such as a criminal record or no permanent address (Slesnick et al., 2018). Further, many homeless youth cannot transport themselves to a workplace or acquire the appropriate clothes for an interview (Slesnick et al., 2018). Finally, from a logistical standpoint, it is difficult to estimate the benefits and drawbacks of employment interventions simply because very little research exists on the specific subject (Morton et al, 2020). In fact, in their meta analysis of interventions for homeless youth, Morton et al (2020) actually found the evidence on homeless youth employment programs inconclusive. It is difficult to completely endorse an intervention strategy when there are several clear barriers to its implementation and effectiveness, and a lack of research assessing its impact.

Connection to Homelessness Services: The final common intervention model for improving the outcomes of homeless youth is homelessness service connection. Morten et al (2020) found that participants in connection programs reported decreased substance use and depression, and increased self-efficacy and physical and mental health. This kind of intervention identifies homeless youth and connects them with services such as drop-in centers, shelters, counseling, and more. Programs that fall into this category serve as liaisons that connect homeless students to needed services. *City Connects*, for example, is a Boston-based intervention

program that connects counselors and school social workers with teachers to create a tailored set of prevention, intervention, and enrichment services for each and every at-risk student (Boston College, 2023). The assigned counselor or social worker is responsible for assessing the strengths and needs of each child, identifying a unique support plan, developing partnerships with community agencies to secure needed services, tracking support plans electronically, and assuring service delivery and effectiveness (Walsh & Backe, 2013). Studies have shown that City Connects improves the academic performance of homeless youth and benefits them long after they leave the intervention at the conclusion of fifth grade (Walsh & Backe, 2013). City Connects students, for example, have significantly higher scores on statewide standardized tests in Math and English in Grades 6, 7, and 8 and a lower probability of being chronically absent through Grade 12 than students in non-City-Connects schools (Walsh & Backe, 2013).

SchoolHouse Connection is a nonprofit that provides advocacy and practical assistance to homeless youth through its partnerships with early childhood programs, schools, institutions of higher education, service providers, and families (SchoolHouse Connection, 2023). While City Connects enlists counselors and teachers to connect students with services, SchoolHouse Connection instead targets state and local educational agencies. Both are recruited to develop professional development plans and customized training programs on various topics such as transportation, unaccompanied youth, early childhood homelessness, early childhood services, and research and data. SchoolHouse Connection also has an extensive library of resources for homeless youth that contains information on how to access appropriate services.

Resources like drop-in centers and soup kitchens can be the difference between life and death for certain homeless youth. As such, organizations that connect homeless youth to those services are invaluable. Even resources like teacher training programs and mental health

counseling, which tend to be less life-or-death than the provision of food and shelter, can motivate homeless youth to go to school or invest in their mental health (National Association of School Psychologists, 2021). Homeless youth do not always know about the services that are available to them, so organizations that serve as liaisons to raise their awareness and connect them to such services are crucial. However, as with preventative interventions, service-based programs are difficult to implement because they require the identification of homeless students. Organizations can only connect homeless students with services if they know they are homeless, which poses a challenge. Further, like for employment-based models, very little research exists that examines the effectiveness of service connection interventions. Morten et al (2020) found the evidence of any effects inconclusive. It is difficult to argue that service connection interventions are the ultimate solution to mitigating the risks of homeless youth when they rely on the identification of homeless youth and have little evidence-backed support.

Something Missing: There is a glaring hole in the most common interventions for homeless youth: None of them address the McKinney-Vento act. There is a law in place that, if implemented efficiently, would very likely help homeless youth achieve higher in school, improve their mental health, and reduce drop-out rates (Ginsburg, Jordan, & Chang, 2014). Looking specifically at improving the educational and mental health outcomes of homeless youth, factors like free transportation to school and accessible information about homeless relief resources are absolutely crucial to youth success. Implementing any of the aforementioned intervention models without making an effort to better implement the McKinney-Vento act is a wasted opportunity to provide comprehensive support to homeless youth. In any intervention, it is critical to build upon frameworks that already exist, and the McKinney-Vento act serves as a foundation for homeless student rights that should be taken advantage of and built upon.

Investing in the Future

The intervention strategies introduced in the previous section only represent seven of the most common methods of helping homeless youth. Many more exist, from substance abuse rehabilitation programs to conversion into religion (Wendt et al, 2018 & Zerger, 2002). There is no realistic way to assert which of these frameworks is the best one, especially since fighting youth homelessness is an issue that is fundamentally about people - and people are different. What works for one youth is not guaranteed to work for another. What *is* known is that children are more likely to succeed when their basic needs are met and they feel competent, autonomous, and a sense of relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It is vital to keep those characteristics in mind as we take a comprehensive approach to helping homeless youth. The next section will argue why schools should be required to inform all students about homeless student rights at least twice per school year, as well as analyze the trends in existing interventions to provide guidance for future efforts aiming to improve educational and mental health outcomes for homeless youth.

Phase I: Delivering Information: One of the primary obstacles to implementing the McKinney-Vento act is that homeless youth are difficult to track. How do you support a population that is virtually invisible? Some researchers have attempted to identify students at risk for homelessness based on certain criteria, but even they run the risk of missing students who are especially good at hiding their status (Interagency Working Group on Ending Youth Homelessness, 2022). The only reliable way to target every student that could be homeless is to target *every* student. It is critical to ensure that *all* youth are aware that homeless students have rights and services available to them. There are a couple ways this can be accomplished, including a mandatory assembly, which is one of schools' go-to information transfer models (Den, 2023). However, assemblies tend to be one-time events, which is not ideal for homeless students who are often absent (National Center for Homeless Education, 2022). Further,

assemblies may bring awareness about homeless student rights to those watching, but for how long? It is estimated that people only remember 3 to 10 percent of the information in a 10-minute presentation one week later (Presented, 2015). If someone becomes homeless weeks or months after the assembly takes place, it will not be very helpful to them in navigating their situation.

Another method that is perhaps more effective than assemblies is distributing informational flyers. An estimated 79% of people keep the leaflets they receive, and flyers tend to be revisited 6 times on average (B&B Press, 2023 & Solopress, 2019). Handouts are designed to deliver important information in a condensed and attractive way, and unlike assemblies, they can be referred back to. Further, teachers can hand out flyers over the course of a few days or weeks to ensure that every student receives one even if they have some absences. They are cost-effective and convenient, as they can be placed in a backpack or folded to fit in a pocket. Further, schools already administer handouts and flyers on a regular basis, so this type of intervention builds on a framework that already exists (Peachjar, 2023). One can argue that handouts will simply be lost or thrown out, especially by homeless youth who may have nowhere to put them, but even if they are, they still plant the seed in students' minds that homeless services exist. Further, many schools now have online platforms that hold onto information for extended periods of time, so students may be able to access lost flyers on a school computer (Bouchrika, 2022). Upon seeing such materials, youth who are hiding their homelessness will have an opportunity to exert their autonomy and make a choice to seek help. Further, youth who are at-risk of homelessness will know what services are available to them should they reach that status. To be most effective, informational flyers regarding McKinney-Vento rights should be given out multiple times per year to remind students of the services that exist and account for students that may transition to homelessness later in the year or transfer into the school.

Better informing students about McKinney-Vento rights would require a certain amount of labor, with individuals responsible for creating, printing, presenting, and distributing materials. This poses a challenge for public schools that are underfunded and low on resources as is, but there are ways to divide labor that would minimize the work and time this approach would absorb (Zdanowicz & Yan, 2022). School principals can reach out to the McKinney-Vento liaison in their district, who is responsible for making informative materials, and ask them to produce drafts, or ask multiple staff members to print materials so as to reduce the workload on any one person. Each teacher, for example, could be made responsible for printing out and distributing materials to the students in their own classroom. Schools already have procedures in place for hanging out flyers and getting information to students, and they would simply need to adopt those strategies for materials on the McKinney-Vento act. It is impossible to fight for your rights when you do not know you have them, so getting information about the McKinney-Vento act to students in an efficient manner is a crucial first step in helping homeless youth.

Phase II: Providing Services: Informational materials are of no use to homeless youth if they are not backed by real services. There are two research-based actions that the government and schools can take to ensure that such quality services are available. First, the McKinney-Vento act needs to be a priority, and liaisons need to be equipped and prepared to do their job. If a school district is telling homeless youth that they have rights, they absolutely have to secure the resources to ensure those rights are protected. District liaisons need to be informed to help students, and services like free transportation must be provided. As previously stated, the provision of McKinney-Vento services would help combat absenteeism, satisfy basic needs for shelter and food, and overall improve the chance of homeless youth graduating from high school, which in turn betters their chances of escaping homelessness (Dukes, 2018). It is essential that

the Federal government takes steps to properly fund and support efforts to teach about and implement the McKinney-Vento act so as to help the largest number of students possible.

Second, schools and/or the government ought to create or connect students with programs that embody the strongest parts of existing interventions and allow for the exploration of youth's competence, autonomy, and sense of relatedness. Across existing intervention models, three trends stick out as having a particularly positive impact on homeless youth, all of which will be dissected in further detail. They include: a) meaningful relationships, b) a sense of stability and independence, and c) mental health support.

Meaningful Relationships: While family therapy is not widely applicable to homeless youth who often run away or are kicked out of their homes, those who do participate in Ecologically Based Family Therapy show declines in depressive symptoms, reduced drug use, and improved well-being (Slesnick, 2021). Homeless youth tend to be better off if they are able to form connections and bond with their family (Slesnick & Prestopnik, 2005). Further, having a mentor is associated with lower odds of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, an increased sense of perceived belonging in the classroom, a lower chance of developing depression, and higher confidence (Aguayo et al, 2021; Bartle-Haring et al, 2012; Lee et al, 2021). Relationships matter, and study after study shows that helping homeless youth form connections with people in their lives is beneficial. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory's proposal that a sense of relatedness matters if youth are going to thrive (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Schools need to prioritize connecting students with or creating programs that have a relationship-forming component.

Stability and Independence: Successful housing and employment programs give youth a sense of stability and independence. Transitional housing programs, for example, help clients pay rent, but decrease the amount of monetary support they provide as youth become financially

stable (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2022). They are designed to give homeless youth the foundations and support they need until they can develop the skills and access the resources they need to support themselves. Groups and organizations that help homeless students find employment are similar - they facilitate the process of getting hired so that youth can then go forward and work to help themselves (Friendship Place, 2021). Making youth feel like they can rely on themselves and are in control of their own lives is important.

Numerous studies have shown that students who have high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to challenge themselves, be intrinsically motivated, put forth a high degree of effort, and attribute failure to things which are in their control, rather than external factors (Kirk, n.d.). They are also more likely to recover quickly from setbacks and achieve their goals (Kirk, n.d.). Self-efficacy comes from feeling independent and in-control, and that can only happen for homeless youth when they are given proper support. Maslow theorized that youth thrive when they have their basic needs met, and the shelter housing programs provide meets one of those needs (Block, 2011). Further, Self-Determination theory posits that youth need to feel both competent and autonomous in order to thrive (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Earning and staying in a job that allows one to make money and start to support his or herself undoubtedly comes with a growing sense of both. Focusing on ways to inspire independence and a sense of stability in homeless youth should be considered heavily in the formation of any intervention.

Mental Health Support: Family-based and counseling interventions aim to improve the mental health of homeless youth as a way to mitigate risk in all aspects of their lives. Counseling is associated with higher levels of problem-solving, academic achievement, learning engagement, peer relationships, and well-being for homeless youth (Bender et al, 2016 & Zhang et al, 2020). It is also correlated to lower levels of perceived burdensomeness (Bender et al, 2016

& Zhang et al, 2020). Cognitive Therapy for Suicide Prevention, for example, has proven to improve levels of social problem-solving and reduce levels of perceived burdensomeness. Positive mental health is crucial to the success of homeless youth. Afterall, how can anyone seek employment, care about grades, or feel independent if they are struggling with suicidal thoughts or depression? Mental health fundamentally matters as it can either keep students hopeful or hopeless, and the difference between those two states can translate to life or death for homeless youth who commit suicide at higher rates than non-homeless youth (Gewirtz O'Brien et al., 2020). Along with focusing on chances for relationship building and independence, intervention efforts should factor in mental health support to best serve homeless youth.

Conclusion

Why Fund: Adding responsibilities and programs for states and schools to implement means one thing: schools need more money they can dedicate to helping homeless students. In fiscal year 2022, the Federal government put $114 million towards the McKinney-Vento act (Ed Case Newsroom, 2022). If you divide that by the number of homeless youth estimated to be in the United States - keeping in mind they are *underreported*- it breaks down to just $67 per student (SAMHSA, 2019). Sixty-seven dollars is barely sufficient to feed someone for a week, so it is certainly not enough to get them the support they need to escape homelessness - and it shows. A frightening number of schools and youth have no idea about the rights they have under the act, and many of them have not accessed a single provision they are entitled to because of that (DiPierro & Mitchell, 2022). As previously stated, district liaisons often do not know they are assigned to homeless youth, and even if they do, many say it would be "easy to simply sit at (their) desk and collect a paycheck" (Cunningham, 2014). Supporting youth like David, Honey, and Kristina is important, and $67 per person is simply not enough to make that happen.

The Federal government spent $32 million more upgrading Federal employees' flights to Business Class than on the McKinney-Vento act (Joyner, 2007). Further, while $114 million has gone to the enforcement of the act, the Office of Management and Budget reports that $1.7 billion is used to maintain empty buildings each year (Carroll, 2022). There is money in our government being improperly spent, and that makes it difficult to justify not increasing funding for McKinney-Vento and other homeless support programs. At least, some of that wasted money should be used to help youth who lack a steady residence - the same youth who are frequently dropping out of school and developing severe mental health issues.

There is an argument to be made that the Federal government should fund McKinney-Vento programs simply because it has a fundamental responsibility to look out for the youth in the United States. Even before and apart from humans, it has always been the inherent duty of a community to look out for their young (Earth Reminder, 2023). Beyond that, where is there more untapped potential in our country than in the 1.7 million young individuals who could be plumbers, astronauts, teachers, chefs, scientists, etc… if only they had the support? We must not forget that these are strong, resilient individuals who have bested the odds and, with proper support, can be set back on the right track and thrive (Kidd & Shahar, 2008). Take Sophia, for example. She was struggling to pass her classes in March 2019 due to family adversity that left her estranged (San Diego Youth Services, 2023). She accessed services and within a year, her grades improved drastically and she got into the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where she is now studying Criminal Justice. Likewise, Erika was thrown out of her home after she became pregnant at the age of 15 (San Diego Youth Services, 2023). She was able to access services and is now the owner of a successful child-care business. When programs are properly funded and homeless youth are aware of their existence, they change lives.

How to Fund: Congress should be investing more into the McKinney-Vento act and services that help homeless youth, but convincing them to do so is an additional challenge. Congress is made up of members, and each member has a personal preference and their own district or State to represent. Different problems will inherently appeal to different members depending on their view and the view of the body they represent. With States, districts, and members of Congress growing more partisan, this often means that Congressmen and women of the same party will care about similar issues, and those issues will be opposed to the ones the other party cares about (Milligan, 2021). However, efforts to fight youth homelessness have consistently garnered support from democrats and republicans alike (Walz, 2015). For example, in March 2022, 71 U.S. Representatives signed a bipartisan letter in support of funding for two McKinney-Vento act services: Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) and the Runaway and Homeless Youth act (RHYA) program (SchoolHouse Connection, 2020). Further, in 2021, Congress passed a bipartisan amendment under the American Rescue Plan to boost support for students experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic (Blad, 2023). This bipartisanship presents a unique opportunity for Congress to shift funding.

Congress makes changes to funding by passing an appropriations bill, and that bill can only pass if the majority in both the House of Representative and the Senate approve (United States Senate, 2023). In 2023, the House is made up of 222 republicans and 213 democrats, giving the republican party a 9-seat majority. This means that, of 435 representatives, only nine members of the republican party need to vote against a Republican bill for it to fail. As for a democratic bill, the entire party would need to vote for the bill *and* have nine republicans vote for it in order to pass. In the Senate, democrats have a 1-vote swing over republicans, meaning that only *one* member needs to vote for a bill they were expected to vote against, or vice versa, to

shift its course entirely. The bottom line is that there is an incredibly small margin for error in Congress, so having bipartisan support is crucial to getting anything done.

Helping homeless youth is a bipartisan issue, and that gives a funding increase a fair shot at being passed through Congress. However, there is an endless list of issues people wish Congress would act on ranging from highway maintenance to medicare to space travel. If Congress is going to act on youth homelessness, members need to be convinced that it is a priority. That distinction often comes down to how much noise surrounds an issue, meaning how many people are pressuring them to act and how often they hear about it (CliffsNotes, 2023). Afterall, members of Congress hear about a wide variety and large number of issues, so they will be more inclined to act on the issues that "stick out" to them. One sector of our democracy has the sphere of influence it takes to raise that kind of awareness about an issue: Interest groups.

The National Rifle Association (NRA) has had a massive influence on blocking anti-assault weapon legislation from passing Congress (Maury, 2022). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) intensely lobbied and succeeded in convincing Congress to pass the Civil Rights act of 1991 (Stanford, n.d.). In the 1990s, The Sierra Club convinced Congress to reauthorize the Clean Air act, and the National Organization for Women (NOW) played a major role in adding sex, sexual orientation, and disability to Federal hate crime legislation (Sierra Club, 2023 & National Organization for Women, 2023). Interest groups have the power to influence policy, and it has been proven time and time again. There are existing interest groups that advocate for homeless youth, but they have yet to succeed in securing a funding increase for the McKinney-Vento act or related services. Successful interest groups are able to encourage members to write to their representatives or senators, lobby Congressional staff, and push the public to vote for officials that will favor their position on an issue. Homeless

youth interest groups like the National Coalition for Youth Homelessness and SchoolHouse Connection need to use the funding they do have to gain and engage a larger membership. This requires educating the public on the issue and motivating them to care. Not enough people know about the youth homelessness crisis, and it is up to the interest groups that exist to spread that knowledge. To get through to Congress and to gain funding, noise has to be created. Those who care about the issue the most need to motivate others to join their cause.

It is important to note that it is difficult to convince people who do not believe that youth homelessness affects them to "make noise" about the topic. People inherently care most about issues that affect them. So, interest groups need to find a way to appeal to a public that is largely unmotivated about the issue. They can do that by following one of two approaches. First, they can share stories like the three that are presented at the beginning of this paper. Empathy is powerful, and parents who have kids they love may be particularly susceptible to stories of children just like theirs who are struggling to succeed and survive. *Schoolhouse Connection*, for example, tends to use broad statements such as "all children and youth deserve the right to an education," on their website, but real quotes from affected youth would probably be more effective (SchoolHouse Connection, 2023). According to Myers (2007), most people who give money to charity are motivated by their emotions, and especially a sense of pity. Relying on pathos is an effective tactic to gain advocates for an issue. However, some people are not convinced by emotions; Some people need to see a tangible benefit to supporting a cause.

The second approach interest groups can take to garner support is to highlight the societal benefits of fighting youth homelessness. Those benefits include, as previously mentioned, taking advantage of a massive source of untapped economic potential. Homeless youth could be contributing to the economic welfare of our country, and that benefits *everyone.* Is your local

school missing a guidance counselor? Is your closest hospital short-staffed? There are 1.7 million youth who could be filling those positions if only they had the support. Further, nobody plans on being homeless. Nobody *wants* to be homeless. That means that everybody knows someone, or *is* someone, that has the potential to experience youth homelessness during their lifetime. Interest groups need to do a better job emphasizing those points to gain membership and support.

A Closing Reminder: There are an estimated 103,630,000 people in the United States under the age of 24 and at least 1,700,000 of them are homeless (Duffin, 2022). That means that for every 98 non-homeless youth we interact with on a daily basis, we interact with 2 who are homeless. This translates to 10 homeless youth in an average U.S. high school, 66 in an average Massachusetts school district, and 100 to 300 at any given medium-sized college (Public School Review, 2023; Maciag, 2016; Velasco, 2022). Homeless youth tend to be an invisible population, but that does not mean they are not all around us. Properly funding the McKinney-Vento act and investing in evidence-based intervention programs would improve the education and mental health outcomes of *millions* of our nation's most vulnerable. "Throughout everything I went through, my support system at school kept me focused and made sure my needs were met as best as they could," said Jahnee to the U.S. Department of Education (Homeroom, 2021). "By showing empathy and providing a safe space for students experiencing homelessness," she added, "you can help ensure that they too can pursue their goals and find a way out of an often unbreakable cycle of homelessness." There are tangible things that the United States can do to better support homeless youth, and it is far past time to act.

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