



The University of Texas at Austin  
**Texas Education Review**  
College of Education

Journal Homepage: [Texas Education Review](http://www.review.education.texas.edu)

Published online: February 2020

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Homeless Youth Need Natural Mentors*

DESIREE VIRAMONTES LE

*The University of Texas at Austin*

**To cite this article:** Viramontes Le, D. (2019). Falling through the cracks: Homeless youth need natural mentors. *Texas Education Review*, 8(1), 127-137. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/7045>

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## Falling Through the Cracks: Homeless Youth Need Natural Mentors

DESIREE VIRAMONTES LE  
The University of Texas at Austin

President Trump and Congress have slashed and defunded spending on domestic programs such as education and poverty in their “America First” budget that leaves most vulnerable Americans last (Office of Management and Budget, 2017; Partelow, Benner, Dannenberg, & Barone, 2018). America is struggling to not leave any child behind, and without support in funding for education and social services on the federal level, it is more apparent today that homeless students in K-12 need an advocate to ensure that their educational needs are met. In what follows, I first provide a background for this study. Next, I briefly discuss the legislation and literature of youth homelessness then describe my findings. I conclude with implications for school practice and future research.

### Background

Congress established the Education for Homeless Children and Youth program in 1987, which provided grant funding to meet the needs of homeless students in K-12 (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007), in response to reports that only 57% of homeless children were enrolled in schools. The McKinney Vento Assistance Act of 1987 (M-V), subsequent reauthorizations of No Child Left Behind, and ESSA also offer increasing supports, access to basic needs and academic assistance with the creation of the position of a “homeless liaison” for homeless youth specifically.

Currently homeless liaisons are specially designated people in K-12 settings that work daily to assist youth who are homeless with issues surrounding housing, transportation, public education and higher education access.

The McKinney Act Education of Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program is a requirement of all school districts to support identification and outreach; assistance with school enrollment and placement; transportation assistance; school supplies; coordination among local service providers; before and after school and summer educational programs; and referrals to support services (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007).

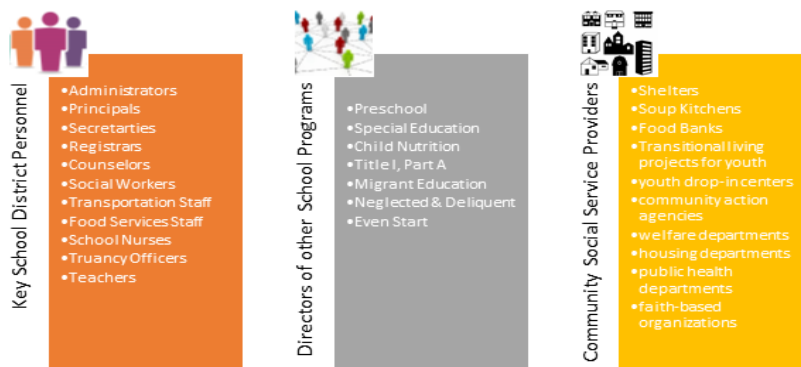


Figure 1. McKinney Vento Recommended Relationships for Homeless Liaisons (NCHE, 2008)

As seen in Figure 1, the homeless liaison is designated at the school district level to work primarily with key personnel that include central administrators, campus administrators, the transportation department and the food service department to fulfill the different mandates of the McKinney Vento Act.

The McKinney Vento law as it exists in policy provides sufficient guidance for all the basics that a school district should implement to adequately support homeless youth. In the last section of Figure 1, the federal government outlines different expectations outside regular education duties for the homeless liaisons to coordinate relationships in the community for the homeless families and youth. Homeless liaisons also battle the societal narrative about homelessness as well as a general understanding of homelessness with unique educational advocacy that balances fulfilling basic needs and students receiving a high-quality education.

### **Housing Challenges of Homeless Students**

A quick Google image search of “homeless” displays the current societal image of homeless adults on the street in substandard conditions. The reality is that homelessness looks like a variety of different living situations. Across the literature, the problem of educating homeless students in K-12 is compounded with the public’s ignorance of educating homeless youth, yet the reality is there are 1.3 million children in K-12 schools, that are homeless in the United States today (Balingit, 2017; Milner, 2017; Pavlakis & Duffield, 2017).

The current societal image of homelessness is institutionalized in the definition of “homeless” from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that identifies two classifications of homelessness, which include unsheltered individuals, and those with families living in homeless shelters. In order to break down the barriers created within the narrow definition of homelessness from HUD, the Department of Education’s definition of homeless is broader and has been expanded through M-V to also include the following classifications of homelessness: families that are doubled up and consist of more than one family to a home; families whose address is a motel or hotel (Miller, 2011). The more inclusive definition from the Department of Education is contingent on the family lacking a “fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” and a “loss of housing, economic hardship, or financial difficulties” (NCHE, 2007).

Homeless families can quickly find themselves in various cycles of poverty. An example of a cycle of poverty that contributes to a continued state of homelessness is the motel/hotel cycle where families are unable to find housing and economic stability by paying more each month to live in the motel. I define the motel/hotel cycle in Figure 2, as a pattern that develops over time with the higher cost of motel or hotel living (in comparison to renting) in conjunction with an inability to rent due to a bad credit history that forces a family to be in a cycle of continued homelessness.

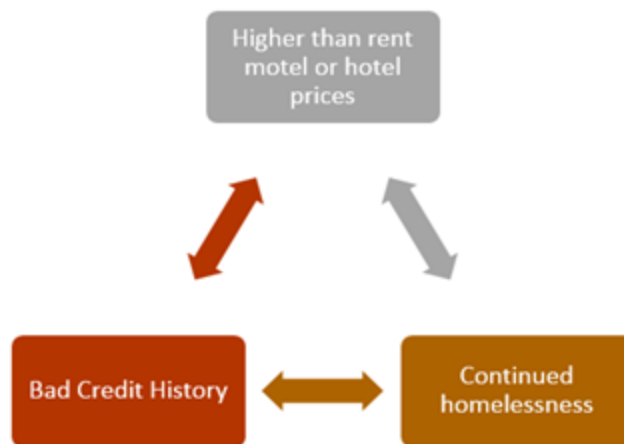


Figure 2. Motel/Hotel Cycle Developed by author

Currently families/individual students transition through different states of homelessness; once they find a couch to surf for a week or a motel for the night, they are no longer considered homeless in HUD's eyes and ineligible for housing options from the federal government. Legislation is needed that will align the definitions. For the homeless liaison and homeless youth, this limits the shelter options that every homeless family needs. This misalignment between the federal departments' policies and definitions creates burdensome and inconsistent barriers for homeless people trying to fulfill the basic need of shelter. Edwards (2019) notes a policy gap between HUD and Department of Education, around a comprehensive, holistic definition of homelessness. For families and youth who are temporarily living with relatives or other adults, as well as those living in shelters, motels, or cars housing assistance while trying to attend school is crucial (Miller, 2011).

### High School to College Barriers

The ESSA's requirements have brought about many firsts for homeless youth. Data on homeless graduation rates is mandated and will be compiled nationally for the first time from the 2017-2018 school year. Currently, graduation data is available for six states' for homeless and overall graduation rates is included in Table 1 below. Homeless youth are increasingly being left behind with double digit differences in state graduation rates as compared to, the national graduation rates which are rising to record highs of 84% in 2016 (Balingit, 2017; Colorado State Department of Education, 2016; Dyer & Green, 2014; Kansas State Department of Education, 2015; Meyer, 2017; Virginia Department of Education, 2017).

Table 1  
*Comparison of Homeless Graduation Rates v. Overall in CO, KS, TX, VA, WA, & WY*

<u>State</u>	<u>Homeless</u>	<u>Overall State</u>	<u>State Gap</u>	Difference from the National Graduation <u>Rate</u> of 84%
Texas	72.1%	89.7%	↓ 17.6%	↓ 11.9%
Colorado	53.2 %	78.9 %	↓ 25.7%	↓ 30.8%
Kansas	67.5 %	86.1 %	↓ 18.6%	↓ 16.5%
Virginia	74%	91.2%	↓ 17.2%	↓ 10%
Washington	46.1%	77.2%	↓ 31.1%	↓ 37.9%
Wyoming	60.8 %	80.2 %	↓ 19.4%	↓ 24.8%

*Note.* Data for homeless graduation for Texas from Texas Education Agency (2018), for Colorado from Colorado State Department of Education (2016), for Kansas from Kansas State Department of Education (2015), for Virginia from the Virginia Department of Education (2017), for Washington from Dyer & Green (2014), and for Wyoming from Meyer (2017).

To open access to higher education for students experiencing homelessness, state and national legislators must develop policies that address their willful ignorance to date. In 2018, a congressional briefing titled, *A Conversation with Youth: Education, Resilience, Homelessness, and Hope*, was held to persuade the audience to pass legislation to further assist homeless youth transitioning from high school to college. Mutt, one of the Homeless youth in the briefing, talked about pushing through AP classes, dealing with where to shower, sleeping in her car and how she saw higher education as the only path out of the darkness (personal communication, June 12, 2018). Each of the fourteen youth spoke of how they would have benefited from guidance or support from somebody at their school, or within their social network.

Homeless youth are not enrolling in college at a commensurate rate as their peers and this is an issue that goes unaddressed. There is little critical attention on creating bridge programs that assist homeless youth in transitioning from high school to higher education; these students remain largely unidentified and invisible to student support system and policymaking process (Gupton, 2017; Zaff et al., 2014). Once in college, homeless youth face housing, food, and financial instability as well as an additional verification process to validate their homelessness. Homeless youth are different because they do not go to college with the typical familial supports that most college youth take for granted. Current reforms in K-12 include increased FAFSA support, homeless verification letter, and Department of Education college guidance have not been effective in meeting their needs (Pavlakakis & Duffield, 2017).

### **Homeless Liaison**

Every federally funded school district in America employs at least one homeless liaison to assist with issues of access to public education and higher education. However, the implementation of the homeless liaison role within the organizational context of a school district can pose two major challenges. First, though the role of homeless liaison does not have to be exclusive, the McKinney Vento Act specifies that “local educational agencies will designate an appropriate staff person, who may also be a coordinator for other federal programs, as a local educational agency liaison for

homeless children and youths” (subtitle B of title VII, (g)(1)(J)(ii)). The homeless liaison role does not fit within the organizational structure of a school district as naturally as a principal or superintendent does. Homeless liaisons typically wear multiple titles and are tasked with an array of outside of school district traditional functions and relationship building as demonstrated in Figure 1 to support their student population. Miller (2013) argues the McKinney–Vento’s positionally attached authority, then, is limited in that district-level homeless liaisons, who are the backbones of the policy’s implementation, are overwhelmed with multiple responsibilities and growing numbers of homeless youth. Homeless liaisons with multiple responsibilities and titles (Title I coordinator, homeless liaison, foster care liaison, etc.) will lack the capacity to carry out all of the duties outlined in the McKinney Vento act effectively.

The second major challenge is that homeless liaisons work with a difficult to assist and marginalized student group that has an array of basic needs that transcend the typical student needs such as housing, transportation and food. A homeless liaison’s challenge is to implement programs and systems for school personnel to heighten their awareness of, and capacity to respond to, specific problems in the education of homeless children and youths. “About one out of every five schoolchildren is growing up in poverty with all of its associated problems: poor nutrition, inadequate health care, transience, and stress” (Fowler, 2013, p. 62). A student that is homeless is easily disconnected from the school organization when these basic needs go unfilled. Schools are not typically outfitted to address these needs and rely on the homeless liaison as well as the surrounding community support and sub grant funds to fill the void.

Homeless liaisons often serve as natural mentors when they provide guidance through this last transition from high school to college with FAFSA assistance, homeless verification letter for college financial aid offices along with wrap around community resources. Enrollment in a four-year university does not guarantee homeless youth with more stable housing accommodations, unless they have access to room and board through federal assistance or scholarships.

### **Natural Mentors**

The school organization can serve as a refuge for a homeless student to find emotional support, sustenance, and consistency that the student can rely on. A typical problem in our classrooms is that homeless students in K-12 are invisible to the untrained educator. “Through the United States, schools most frequently punish the students who have the greatest academic, social, economic, and emotional needs” (Noguera, 2003, p. 341). Homeless student’s low attendance rates, large achievement gaps, high rates of behavior problems, and high school mobility have education-related ramifications that make accessing college daunting and adult homelessness likely (Stronge & Reed-Victor, 2000). For homeless youth, access to postsecondary success and avoidance of adult homelessness is compounded by barriers to accessing financial aid, rising college costs, and any school personnel that are not trained to assist youth that are homeless. The homeless liaison functions as the bridge between academic supports within the school district and wraparound services within the community for these vulnerable homeless youth. Students that are homeless are in need of natural mentors; those non-parent adults or surrogate parents that guide them in accessing resources to be successful in transition to adult life.

In reviewing the literature about homeless youth there was a lot identified about the M-V law and the role of various school personnel, but little to no mention of mentorship from school personnel for homeless youth. Students that are homeless need natural mentors who serve as non-parent

adults or surrogate parents that guide them in accessing resources to be successful in transition to adult life (Dang & Miller, 2013). Homeless youth are ill equipped to handle the challenges of school without the support of natural mentors. In the school setting, mentors can be comprised of a homeless liaison, teacher, counselor, principal or a caring community member that work to support the holistic success of the homeless youth (Edwards, 2019).

Homeless youth need a combination of supportive parents, teachers, peers, and adult role models who provide guidance and give students social capital to draw on to get to college. As one homeless youth said:

“And then in high school, my last year, my counselor, attendance advisor and someone else, they were sending me scholarship applications. And things that like they knew I could take advantage of and I was capable of. So, I had a book scholarship for maybe \$500. And then I had another scholarship. Over the summer, they took me shopping for clothes. They took me dorm room shopping. And, I went to basically a huge event for students who graduated from high school. They supplied us with so many things. It was like giving us an experience we never really had. We were like in a ballroom. And there was a whole bunch of forks and knives on the table. And they were trying to teach us how we were supposed to eat. It just gave us a huge advantage...” (Skobba, Meyers, & Tiller, 2018).

Homeless youth potentially encounter dozens of natural mentor candidates on a typical school day: the bus driver on their way to school; the cafeteria staff as they receive their complimentary meal; the counselor to care and advise; the teacher as they sit down to learn; the community members involved in the campus and outside of the campus. Though there is heavy mention in the literature about the roles of the homeless liaison, administrator and counselor there is a gap in the research about other school personnel that can assist homeless youth (Havlik, et al., 2017; Miller, 2011; Timberlake & Sabatino, 1994; Tobin, 2016).

The homeless liaison, counselor, and school personnel that can serve as natural mentors and work to find supports for homeless youth can mitigate the negative effects of homelessness. Homeless liaisons, counselors and other school personnel are the education stakeholders mainly affected by M-V legislation and the Department of Education guidance in a school district to support homeless youth (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007). As discussed previously, homeless liaisons work to provide a network of assistance within the campus, school district and surrounding community for wrap-around services to fulfill basic, emotional, and academic needs. Good administration is encouraged by good ideas and to be successful with homeless youth, school personnel need to be equipped with ideas to help support students academically and socially.

Under current M-V guidelines, homeless liaisons and counselors are the school personnel that assist youth that are homeless. Administrators, registrars, cafeteria workers, teachers, and all school personnel have the potential to be a natural mentor for homeless youth. For homeless youth to achieve multiple positive life outcomes such as mental and physical health, accessibility of services, high school completion, college enrollment, vocational assistance, higher self-esteem and healthy interpersonal relationships, they need natural mentors or a significant adult (Altena, Brilleslijper-Kater, & Wolf, 2010; Dang & Miller, 2013). Homeless liaisons under M-V are also tasked with providing school personnel with clear guidance in the regulations, professional development and dedicated

personnel to adequately transition larger graduating numbers of youth that are homeless from high school into a successful college experience (Miller, 2013).

### **Recommendations**

More research, legislation, resources and support is needed to delve into the relationship between homelessness and high school graduation, college enrollment, college success and workforce outcomes. Traditionally, school counselors are the personnel tasked with preparing and assisting youth with college entrance support and counseling services. Homeless liaisons with dedicated time as natural mentors could assist with students' postsecondary outcomes such as assistance with FAFSA for Pell eligibility; access to advanced courses in high school Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), or college dual-credit courses. Also, there is currently no homeless liaison at the college level to assist students in bridging the gap between K-12 and higher education.

### **Counselors**

According to Havlik (2018), school counselors should be the "first line of support", but notes "counselors often feel helpless despite their desire to help students who are experiencing homelessness" (p. 1). The transition from high school to college can be especially challenging given the transition is also between the K-12 public education system and higher education institutions. The Department of Education directs youth that are homeless as follows: "if you need help to correctly answer a question contact a local liaison, school counselor, or the financial aid office or a financial aid administrator at the college you are interested in attending" (United States Department of Education, 2018). School personnel need clear guidance in the regulations, professional development and dedicated personnel to adequately transition larger graduating numbers of youth that are homeless from high school into a successful college experience. Without these solutions, education stakeholders are further disadvantaged by implementation of another unfunded mandated policy for marginalized student groups in need of better support (Havlik, et al., 2017).

### **Alignment of Homeless Definition**

As discussed previously, the current definition of homeless from HUD identifies two classifications of homelessness, which include unsheltered individuals along with families living in homeless shelters. The Homeless Children and Youth Act of 2019 (H.R.2001), if passed during the current Congressional term, will align the definition of homelessness across multiple federal agencies. Currently, legislation is needed which will allow youth that are homeless in doubled up and motel/hotel living situations access to federal housing programs.

### **Higher Education Homeless Support**

Across the literature there is an increase in focus on higher education and the transition to postsecondary education for youth that are homeless (Aviles de Bradley, 2015; Hallett & Skrla, 2017). In the literature and legislation reviewed, there is currently no federal legislation for a higher education homeless support, similar to the K-12 homeless liaison mandated in the M-V, at the college level to assist students in bridging the gap between K-12 and higher education. The College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007 (CCRAA) was enacted by Congress as a reauthorization of "The Higher Education Act and expanded the definition of independent student to include youth who are (a) unaccompanied and homeless, or (b) unaccompanied, self-supporting, and at-risk of homelessness"



(Crutchfield, Chambers & Duffield, 2016). The CCRAA and the M-V function when various educators are aware of the law and implement both with consistency (Aviles de Bradley, 2015).

Without higher education supports, education stakeholders are further disadvantaged by attempting to connect homeless youth with institutions of higher education. Quantitative and qualitative research is needed to delve into the relationship between homelessness and high school graduation, college enrollment, college success and workforce outcomes (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017). Current publications and resources for youth that are homeless are unable to offer substantive support and advice for homeless liaisons, students, and campus personnel that are trying to navigate financial aid and higher education enrollment.

The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children (NAEHCY) and “other stakeholders are attempting to adapt M–V to the post-secondary environment, with single points of contact” that function like a K-12 homeless liaison. A couple of states also have their own policies related to homelessness in higher education settings in Nevada, Tennessee, Louisiana and California providing supports such as enabling “students experiencing homelessness to access housing during school breaks” (Pavlakis & Duffield, 2017, p.825).

Advocacy and understanding are paramount in creating opportunities for youth that are homeless and in need of the most protection and support under the law to obtain access to higher education and a better life.

### **Conclusion**

The complexity of homelessness is rife with factors for students that make going to school successfully a daily challenge. The hope for these students lies in the caring school personnel that they encounter each day. It only takes one significant individual or mentor to make a difference in these students' lives. Implications for future research include the transition of these youth from public education to postsecondary opportunities and ending homelessness. What is the relationship between homelessness and students' college enrollment? Specifically, at what rate are homeless youth obtaining college success and workforce outcomes as measured by persistence in obtaining a bachelor's degree and employment? What happens to homeless youth that fall through the cracks?

Every day in our schools all school personnel can be the natural mentor that homeless youth need in bringing all Americans homes. Legislators, government departments, and public educators have an opportunity to make college more accessible with higher education support, resources, and legislation for a group of students that has been traditionally marginalized and stigmatized in the public education system.

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**DESIREE VIRAMONTES LE**, M.Ed., is a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy at The University of Texas at Austin, as well as homeless and foster care liaison for Round Rock ISD. Le has been a public school educator for fourteen years and is on a journey towards making policy into equitable practice for K-12 systems.

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