



fact sheet

Miles To Go: The Flip Side of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

A STUDY BY THE INSTITUTE FOR CHILDREN AND POVERTY • JANUARY 2003

While homelessness disrupts all aspects of family life, of special concern are the obstacles imposed upon a child's education. When a family becomes homeless in New York City, they are often placed in shelters that are located outside of their school district and far from supportive relatives. Until recently, only students with addresses within a school district were allowed to attend that district's schools. As a result, parents have felt that they have no choice but to transfer their children to a school closer to their temporary placement. This is problematic because homeless children often lack the immunization records and prior school documentation that are needed for enrollment. Historically, this has caused difficulties with enrollment that have cost homeless children valuable school days. Studies show that, in New York City, 37% of homeless children miss more than two weeks of school each year while 33% of these children miss more than one month. 28% of parents attribute these absences to the stress of homelessness, and 47% cite frequent illness, a common result of homelessness.¹

Frequent moves increase the chances that a child will have to change schools. Between 2001 and 2002, 42% of homeless children transferred schools at least once. Out of these children, 51% transferred twice or more.² Researchers estimate that it takes a child four to six months to recover academically from this type of disruption.³ A New York study found that roughly three quarters of homeless children (75%) perform below grade level in reading, and half perform below grade level in math (54%).⁴ As a result, 23% of homeless children repeat a grade and 13% are placed in special education classes, many times mistakenly.⁵

A 2001 amendment to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act attempts to alleviate many of these barriers. For example, schools are now required to enroll a student on demand even if that child

lacks immunizations, prior school records, a permanent address or an accompanying adult (see Table 1). The Act mandates that children be allowed to remain in the school that they were attending at the onset of homelessness even if their shelter placement is outside of that district. Allowing students to remain in their school of origin without having to mislead school administrators about a child's address allows homeless children to learn in an environment that is famil-

iar and comfortable.

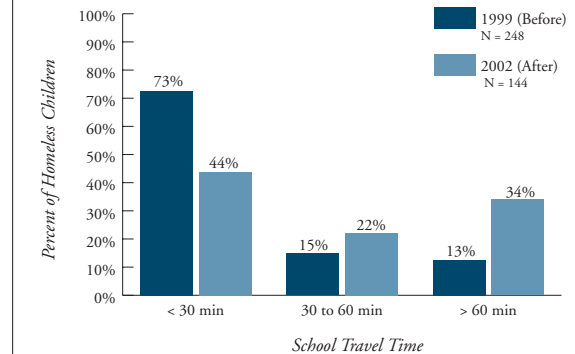
The Act is recognized nationwide as a milestone in the education of homeless children. However, there is a flip side to this new freedom in large metropolitan areas such as New York City. Urban areas often contain a multitude of schools and districts to choose from and children frequently utilize public transportation to get to and from school. This is stressful and time consuming for both the child and their accompanying parent. In the spring of 2002, The Institute for Children and Poverty (ICP) studied the Saratoga Family Inn in Queens in order to determine the effects of McKinney-Vento on this region. What ICP found at this transitional housing facility sheds new light on the unintended side effects of this legislation in urban areas like New York.

A Dispersion of Children

The study reveals that, since McKinney-Vento, more parents are keeping their children enrolled at their school of origin rather than transferring them to a school closer to their shelter placement. As a result, the time it takes these children to get to and from school significantly increases at the onset of homelessness.

At the Saratoga Family Inn, thirty-four percent (34%) of school-aged children spend one hour or more traveling to and from school (see Figure 1).⁶ Twice a day, these children spend long hours on public transportation commuting across four boroughs of the city (see Figure 2). This is taxing for young children who are already struggling with the strain of homelessness. Waking up early and returning home late disrupts a child's sleeping and eating patterns. Enthusiastic participation in school and learning is replaced by chronic lateness and absenteeism.

Figure 1: Comparison of School Travel Times for Homeless Children Before and After McKinney-Vento, New York City, 1999 and 2002



Source: Institute for Children and Poverty. Data significant at .01 level.

The percentage of homeless children traveling long distances to get to school has increased significantly since the McKinney-Vento Act was amended in 2001.

Table 1: Key Facts on the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

Table with 1 column and 1 row containing key facts on the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, including rights to remain in school of origin, attend school in vicinity of temporary placement, enroll without proper documentation, receive enrollment assistance, and go to school with non-homeless children.

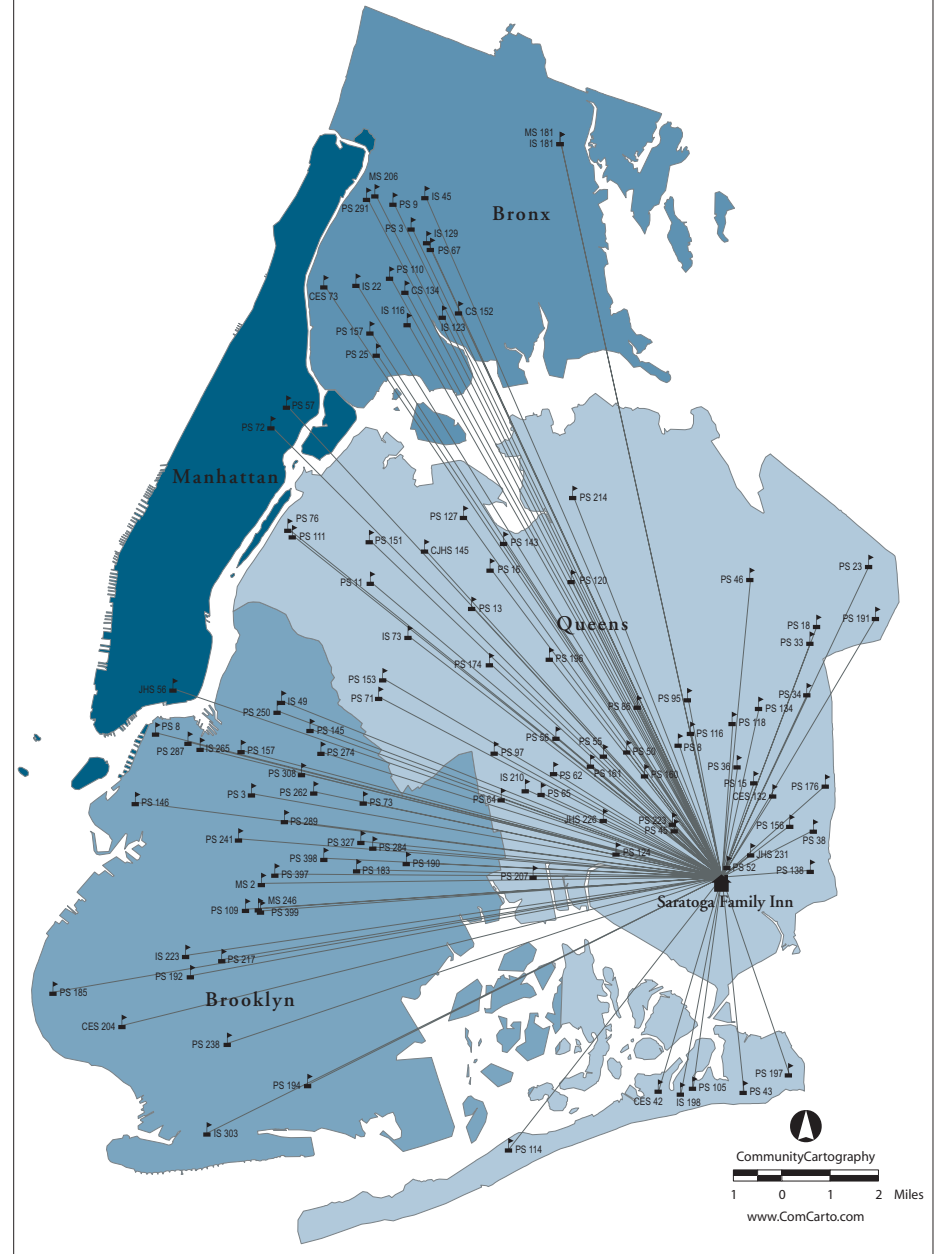
Source: The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

Additional educational hurdles have been set in motion as well. The Saratoga Family Inn offers accelerated after-school programs that are tailored to meet the unique needs of homeless children. However, children commuting one hour or longer often return to the shelter too late to participate in these programs. These children spend valuable time on the train or bus when they could be getting extra assistance with their homework, literacy, math and social skills.

Other temporary housing facilities across New York City are likely to demonstrate similar patterns. There are over 8,500 homeless school-aged children (ages six to thirteen) residing in shelters throughout New York City.⁷ If this study is an indication of the overall trend, then over 3,000 (38%) homeless children will miss more than two weeks of school this year. Out of these children, over 1,000 (33%) will miss more than one month. Moreover, over 6,000 (75%) homeless children will perform below grade level in reading, and over 4,500 (54%) will perform below average in math. As a result, over 1,500 (20%) of these children will repeat a grade. Now consider the fact that approximately 2,900 (34%) of these struggling children spend long hours traveling to and from school, limiting their access to supportive educational programming. With hurdles such as these, how can they possibly succeed?

Obviously, the reauthorization of McKinney-Vento makes great strides in securing access to education for homeless children. However, its implementation is peppered with land mines. Cities in particular must ensure that increased access does not lead to increased failures for children. In short, we must prevent this flip side of McKinney-Vento from becoming the norm.

Figure 2: Schools Attended by Homeless Children Living at the Saratoga Family Inn, 2002



The Saratoga Family Inn houses 226 school-aged children who travel to 110 different elementary and middle schools located across Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx and Manhattan. Many of these children remained at their school of origin upon becoming homeless.⁸

Notes

1. Institute for Children and Poverty, 2002.
2. Institute for Children and Poverty, 2002.
3. Laurene M. Heyback and Patricia Nix-Hodes, "Reducing Mobility: Good for Kids, Good for Schools," *The Beam: The Newsletter of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth* 9, no.1 (1999): 5.
4. David H. Rubin et al., "Cognitive and Academic Functioning of Homeless Children Compared with Housed Poor Children," *Pediatrics* 97 (March 1996):289.
5. Institute for Children and Poverty, Teen Pregnancy, 2002.
6. In 2002 The Institute for Children and Poverty surveyed 149 families living at the Saratoga Family Inn. The number of children represented in Figure 1 is lower than that on the map because the optional survey was conducted at one point in time and the data on the map is based on information collected upon shelter intake.
7. New York City Department of Homeless Services.
8. See note 6.

The **Institute for Children and Poverty** is an independent research and policy think tank that works in close association with Homes for the Homeless. Through the development of effective public policy initiatives and the dissemination of quantitative research findings, the Institute examines and offers unique strategies to combat the impact of homelessness and poverty on the lives of children and their families.

Homes for the Homeless (HFH) is a private, non-profit organization based in New York City that operates American Family Inns. Since 1986, HFH has worked to break the cycle of poverty and dependence among homeless families through education-based services.

36 Cooper Square, 6th Floor
 New York, NY 10003
 p 212 529.5252 • f 212 529.7698
www.instituteforchildrenandpoverty.org

Leonard N. Stern, *Founder & Chair*

Ralph Nunez, Ph.D., *President & CEO*