New Study Finds School Districts May be Undercounting Students Experiencing Homelessness

Camden, N.J.– February 7, 2024–School districts around the United States report that more than 1.2 million students experience homelessness every year. But a new study published in the academic journal *Educational Researcher* reports the number may actually be much higher, indicating that many students may be missing out on additional support provided by school districts.

The study reviewed the student population at Camden City Schools in New Jersey and was conducted through a partnership between the school district, Nemours Children's Health and the Camden Coalition. The study used data from the district joined with the Coalition's ARISE database and several analytical methods to develop preliminary estimates of students experiencing homelessness. Homelessness refers to when a student lacks a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence.

The school district already gathers information to determine students' housing status. But through using the district's data in new ways and linking it across different social service programs, the researchers found that student homelessness may be between a third to 4 times greater than the levels officially recognized in the district. This wide range underscores the inherent difficulty of identifying and serving students experiencing homelessness as well as the large scale of the problem.

"Schools play a vital role supporting students and their families," said Ebony Maddox, Homeless Education Liaison for Camden City Schools, "but many families do not know that supports are available and school staff often do not know when families are experiencing homelessness. We need more tools to help us reach students so that homelessness does not get in the way of education."

"While more research is necessary, it is unlikely that Camden is an outlier and a good possibility that many other school districts have considerably under-identified the number of children who meet the federal definition of homelessness," said J. J. Cutuli, PhD, a Senior Research Scientist in the Center for Healthcare Delivery Science located at Nemours Children's Health. "These findings hold the potential to reach hundreds more students experiencing homelessness in Camden alone and, if this research were applied more broadly, could find a large number of children are not receiving the support they need."

Students experiencing homelessness often face challenges including academic disruption, food insecurity, and transportation difficulties. These students, as a group, tend to have lower attendance and higher rates of school mobility, changing schools every time they relocate.

The study used information that the school district already had collected for every student, such as the use of the address of a shelter or motel when the child registered for school. Some strategies the partners used brought together these school data with health or other public records. Their approach suggests that partnerships between schools and healthcare providers could be helpful.

About the Study

The study was conducted through a research-practice partnership between The Camden City School District, The Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers, and Nemours Children's Health. The study used information from Camden City Schools and the ARISE integrated data system operated by the Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers. The data span five years, from 2014-15 to 2018-19. Full details are available, free of charge, from the publisher's website at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/0013189X231215347 .

The study was wholly funded by a grant from Institute for Education Sciences of the U. S. Department of Education to Cutuli (PI) and Torres Suarez (Co-PI) (R305H190067). The opinions expressed are those of the authors.

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