

Hidden homelessness among high school students

By Stacey Havlik, The Conversation

One in 30.

That's what a new first-of-its-kind study found was the number of students ages 13 to 17 who have experienced homelessness in the past year. The figure represents about 700,000 young people nationwide.

When a student is homeless in high school, it can cause high levels of stress and anxiety. While other students are able to focus on getting good grades and planning for college, students who are homeless often worry about basic necessities, such as food, clothing and shelter.

In order to turn things around and help homeless students succeed and have a decent shot at college, school counselors should be seen as our first line of support. I say that based on years of experience as a researcher who has focused on the critical role that school counselors play in helping low-income and first-generation college students make it to college.

Unfortunately, what I have found through my research is that school counselors often feel helpless despite their desire to help students who are experiencing homelessness. They also feel underprepared to support the needs of such students. With increased preparation and knowledge on homelessness, school counselors would be in a much better position to help homeless students succeed.

School counselors may meet homeless students' basic needs by collecting school supplies, clothing or food items for students in need. This can be done by coordinating community

or school donation programs, collecting monetary donations from the community, or applying for grants through the Department of Education. They may also identify resources in the community and collaborate with stakeholders, such as social workers and teachers to form a supportive system. But my research has found that school counselors often lack knowledge about students who are homeless, and have limited training to support their needs. This in turn puts the educational future of students experiencing homelessness in jeopardy.

One of the reasons homeless students can be difficult to identify is because homelessness is often thought of as individuals living on the street or in a shelter. The reality is that homelessness can also take many other forms. In fact, the federal definition of homelessness includes those who lack a "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." This includes individuals and families who are living with others due to a loss of housing, often referred to as "doubling up." Those living in shelters or locations such as motels, hotels, trailer parks or campgrounds because they lack other consistent housing options may also be considered homeless. Individuals who are under 18 and living without a parent or guardian and lack consistent housing are considered "unaccompanied homeless youth." Through having a clear understanding of the various definitions, school counselors can identify students experiencing homelessness quickly and educate others so that if there is a housing loss, students can be provided with the supports they need.

Counselor contact is critical

Research indicates that students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to go to college after they graduate when they have a series of contacts with their school counselors, as opposed to seeing their counselor only once. Unfortunately, my work suggests that school counselors are often forced to focus on meeting homeless students' basic needs. This leads

counselors to offer homeless students the kind of general college support that they would give all students. Consequently, many counselors may neglect the highly specialized college planning needs of students who are homeless. Further, one report suggests that although school counselors are in a position to positively impact students' career and college readiness, they need more extensive graduate and in-service training on college and career counseling.

Generally speaking, students who are homeless face emotional distress in the form of anxiety or low self-esteem and lower academic achievement. School can be a place of consistency that can support their postsecondary planning, but only if schools are mindful of the unique needs of high school students experiencing homelessness. Schools must provide individualized support that focuses on enhancing students' expectations of college attendance and their belief in their ability to attend.

When they are identified, students experiencing homelessness can be supported through the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. The federal law includes provisions meant to remove barriers, such as by providing transportation for students who move out of a district because they became homeless. It also allows for quick enrollment for students experiencing homelessness regardless of the required paperwork, and funding for programming such as academic support or after school programs. It also allows for a local liaison to ensure students are identified and receiving supports they need. Further, when McKinney-Vento was recently revised under the Every Student Succeeds Act, it specifically stated that school counselors and local liaisons must provide "individualized" college support for students who are homeless. But ultimately, the federal law by itself won't do anything to help students experiencing homelessness. It's all about how well the law is executed at the school level.

Information is crucial

Schools should also include information about McKinney-Vento and college planning that would be directly beneficial to homeless youth on their websites. Unfortunately, few schools are doing so.

Schools can also develop systems of support in the community to support homeless students' basic needs. This will allow them more time to focus on other things, such as college planning.

When advising about college, counselors must determine things such as whether students need campus housing during breaks, if the school has affordable meal plans and if the university has support systems in place for additional counseling, advising, mentoring or tutoring. Directing students to apply to universities that are a good fit will help them to be more successful.

With intentional planning, schools can be a resource for students experiencing homelessness that helps them to stay on track, graduate and go on to college. But if we continue to neglect the specific needs of homeless students, we run the risk of consigning them to lives of uncertainty and placing their college dreams further out of reach.

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