Research Consortium

CALIFORNIA MTSS

UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools

No Shame or Stigmas:

Prioritizing Students Experiencing Homelessness in Long Beach Unified and Monterey County

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SUMMARY

Youth homelessness remains a prominent national challenge for state officials and policymakers, although most pronounced in California *(Rivera, 2022),* largely due to the ongoing housing crisis. Long Beach Unified and Monterey County in particular have significant numbers of students experiencing homelessness. Recognizing that homelessness is a condition that is intersectional with the educational experiences and outcomes of youth, this brief highlights state and school officials' perspectives to examine relevant challenges, policies, and practices related to the youth homelessness crisis. In addition to identifying pertinent challenges, participants provided insights into established and emerging practices and approaches that have been effective in meeting the needs of homeless youth. We conclude this brief with recommendations for state officials, local officials, and school staff to inform better supports of youth impacted by homelessness.

INTRODUCTION

Homelessness and housing insecurity is among the most pressing issues for our country, impacting over 1 million young people nationally *(National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; National Center for Homelessness Education, 2021)* and over 224,000 students in California public schools *(California Department of Education, 2022).* California is ground-zero of this crisis, with one in five housing-insecure students.

While the causes of and solutions for student homelessness have been the subject of debate, the harmful social impacts, particularly on educational outcomes, are not. The disruptive impact of homelessness on students in public education broadly *(Aviles de Bradley, 2015)* and in California *(Bishop et al., 2020)* are unquestioned. Students impacted by homelessness are among the most marginalized groups, experiencing a litany of challenges directly related to conditions of housing instability such as frequent school transitions (school instability) and chronic absenteeism *(Masten et al., 2015; Bishop et al, 2020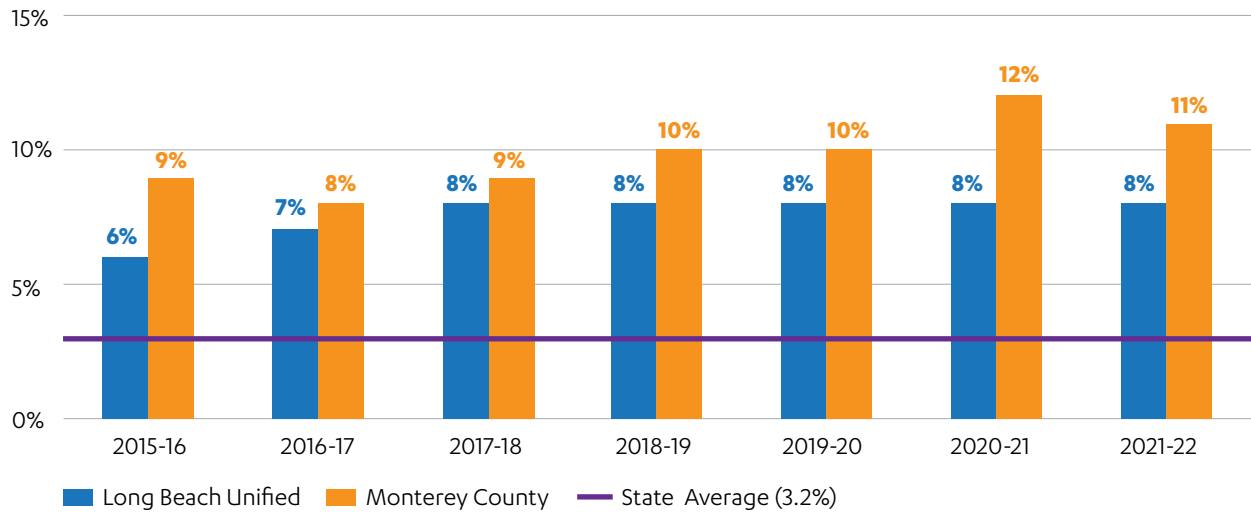; Rivera, 2022).* Such direct challenges are believed to result in the lower levels of academic performance and high school completion that are observed among such students. In addition to academic problems, research indicates that students experiencing homelessness have substantially higher suspension rates, mental health problems, and experiences with school victimization *(Moore, Astor, & Capp, 2022).*

The California Multi-Tiered System of Support (CA MTSS) framework provides a helpful response for universal, targeted, and supplemental supports that counter some of the negative effects of housing insecurity on young people and their educational trajectory. With its focus on aligning academic supports with behavioral supports and social and emotional learning, California MTSS represents an important statewide policy effort. This brief extends the work of Bishop, et al. *(2020),* which provided an overview of the state of homeless education in K-12 and higher education in California, as well as the work of Rivera *(2022),* which examined academic disparities for students experiencing homelessness in a set of California districts. This research brief describes case-study findings from interviews with Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and district administrators in two California areas identified as having strong and responsive approaches that align to the goals of a system

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of support to ensure educational equity for students experiencing homelessness. Specifically, we focus on Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) in Los Angeles County and several districts in Monterey County, located in California's Central Coast, for insights on prioritizing the academic success of housing-insecure students.

Long Beach Unified and Monterey County are communities with significant numbers of students experiencing homelessness. While statewide during this period approximately 3% of public school students are experiencing homelessness, proportions in Long Beach range approximately 6-8% and in Monterey County 8-12%. This is comparatively higher than rates of homelessness in most districts and counties in California.

Figure 1. Rates of Students Experiencing Homelessness, by Year

Legend: Long Beach Unified, Monterey County, State Average (3.2%)

Data by year:
- 2015-16: Long Beach Unified 6%, Monterey County 9%
- 2016-17: Long Beach Unified 7%, Monterey County 8%
- 2017-18: Long Beach Unified 8%, Monterey County 9%
- 2018-19: Long Beach Unified 8%, Monterey County 10%
- 2019-20: Long Beach Unified 8%, Monterey County 10%
- 2020-21: Long Beach Unified 8%, Monterey County 12%
- 2021-22: Long Beach Unified 8%, Monterey County 11%

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FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

To thoroughly investigate the policies, practices, and approaches employed in these communities to support students experiencing homelessness, our research team included participants across an array of capacities, roles, and titles. Study participants included homeless liaisons, social workers, program directors, and school staff. All the participants who were interviewed included differing, similar, and overlapping capacities to engage students and families impacted by homelessness.

STUDY PARTICIPANTS (N=17)

- Homeless Liaison (5)
- Social Worker (4)
- Superintendents and Principals (2)
- Program Directors and Coordinators (6)

DATA ANALYSIS AND PROCEDURES

Focus group and interview data were digitally transcribed and sequentially uploaded into data management and analysis software. Analysis of data began with open coding of transcripts. Subsequent phases included selective coding to identify and label major classifications of data. The major classifications that emerged informed final thematic coding used to construct findings relevant to research questions and project goals.

KEY FINDINGS

In this section we outline and discuss key findings of the study based on interview data from both Long Beach Unified and Monterey County districts to identify common patterns associated with support of students experiencing homelessness. Findings are organized into four areas: Roles & Responsibilities, Promising Practices, Challenges, and the COVID-19 Pandemic.

We first describe the major roles and responsibilities participants identified across positions, particularly as they pertain to homeless students and youth. Next, we center on identified practices participants found effective in their support of students experiencing homelessness. We then discuss common challenges that participants identified related to supporting housing-insecure youth. Among these identified issues, the COVID-19 pandemic substantiated a distinguished category of challenges and circumstances impacting not only students and families but the execution of participants' duties. We conclude our findings with recommendations that participants asserted would bolster their ability to support students and families impacted by homelessness.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In reflection of their primary obligations, participants, all as professionals engaging students and families experiencing homelessness, collectively identified five seminal roles and responsibilities. These include Outreach, Student and Family Supports, Collaborations, Resource Management, and Training. Description of these roles/responsibilities are included in **Table 1.**

PROMISING PRACTICES

In managing their numerous responsibilities, our study participants identified a body of approaches and techniques—which we label "promising practices"—that were effective in supporting students experiencing homelessness in California. These included: 1) Supplemental and Additional Resources, 2) Wraparound Services/Approach, and 3) Community Relationships. A description of these promising practices are included in **Table 2.**

Table 1. Participant Roles and Responsibilities

Role	Responsibilities
Outreach	To properly resource students and youth experiencing homelessness, a major responsibility of participants, particularly homeless liaisons, was to identify and conduct outreach to students and families qualifying as homeless to initiate and facilitate access to relevant resources.
Student and Family Supports	Related to identifying students and families experiencing homelessness is our participants' primary role in providing these students and families with relevant resources and supports.
Collaborations	Due to the manner in which homelessness affects multiple facets of students' lives and impacts them within and outside schools, participants identified creating and facilitating collaborations across community entities, institutions, and resources to most optimally support students and families experiencing homelessness.
Resource Management	A pivotal role of our participants was also the way in which they managed resources—by which we mean the organizing and facilitation of resource accessibility for students and families, working to sustain resources and programs via assessment and funding, and organizing resources to function in tandem to benefit students and families.
Training	Participants facilitated trainings to ensure that teachers and staff are up to date on practices, procedures, and language prescribed to respond to instances of student homelessness.

Table 2. Promising Practices

Promising Practice	Description	Example
Supplemental and Additional Resources	Specialized and additional resources or aid designed and allocated to meet the specific and often compounding academic and socio-emotional needs of students impacted by homelessness.	Individualized , high-impact tutoring
"Wraparound" Services/Approach	Related to meeting both the academic and non-academic needs, wraparound services and approaches refers to a multi-system and multi-component approach for services, in order to be as comprehensive and responsive as possible for homeless students and youth.	Collaboration and communication between resource agencies
Community Relationships	Relationships and partnerships with community entities, groups, and individuals.	Parent-Teacher Associations

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CHALLENGES

Within their work, participants described common and persisting challenges they encountered as professionals engaging issues of student homelessness, most pronouncedly: identification of students, gaps in policy, and stigma.

Identification of Students

Proper identification of students experiencing homelessness is a substantial challenge facing school staff and professionals *(Moore et al., 2023).* Despite common and prescribed identification protocol and procedures, these approaches for identifying students and families experiencing homelessness often fell short in the experiences of study participants. As described, school and professional staff members often found that many teachers were inadequately trained in identifying homelessness.

"I think the biggest challenge is being able to train other people to see how I see and recognize the signs of homelessness and how they can appear in schools."

Xavier, LBUSD social worker

Gaps in Policy

Participants identified important gaps or blind spots in policy, their engagement of policies, and informed procedures that prevented students and families experiencing homelessness from accessing resources and supports. These major policy hurdles interfere and obscure the needs of students experiencing homelessness, mirroring existing statewide research *(Bishop, et al., 2020).*

"I would say the biggest gap in resources in Monterey County is there are no shelters for unaccompanied minors. So, anyone under the age of 18 that's not with a family member, we don't have housing resources like a shelter for them. This is a huge problem because they're not with their families and they don't have the option to check themselves into somewhere else, like a motel. Our coalition is actually advocating currently to change that at the county level, and San Benito County is doing the same thing as well. Again, just because it is a huge gap. Yes, here at school we can provide students with hygiene kits and school supplies, but what are they supposed to do, hold the backpack over their head at night because they have nowhere to live? In that regard, the policies simply aren't helpful and that's the biggest gap."

Melisa, Monterey County Senior Education Liaison & Homeless Liaison

Stigmas

Participants identified stigmas facing students and families experiencing homelessness as another significant challenge, impacting the experience, treatment, and expression of students and families, paralleling broader statewide findings and research *(Bishop et al., 2020).* Within these discussions participants also noted how they themselves and other staff often work with students and families to counter the stigmas often associated with homelessness.

"I know that some of the challenges that have come up when we learn about students that are experiencing homelessness is that there's that shame. So, parents and students feeling like if they tell anybody that they're homeless, their kids will be taken away from them and so they don't want to let anybody know."

Christine Walker, LBUSD Director of Student Support Services and District Designated Homeless Liaison

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COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Although our research team designed and allocated protocol items to investigate pertinent challenges participants' encounter, the COVID-19 pandemic was an especially difficult circumstance—at times uniquely intense, vexing, and novel—than previously reported challenges. Already experiencing intersecting conditions of inequality and poverty, many California families were in a compounded manner impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic *(Bishop et al, 2020).* Within this study, participants distinguished how the pandemic both exacerbated existing challenges and created new ones, including troubled rollout of response procedures, related staffing shortages, increases in disciplinary infractions, health and wellness, absenteeism, and technological barriers.

"For our homeless families—and I can't say it enough how important school is—school is a sanctuary. They're receiving food, education, and child care. But for a family that's trying to find employment, that's living in a car, the pandemic, when it was happening, destroyed their ability have their kids engaged in school, and as social workers, we're very empathetic of this. But it's really hard for a district to think policy-wise, as an educational institution, how to address families that are in these circumstances when education is not the first priority because your child is living in a car with you, when parents are trying to find jobs, or having mental health issues, drug abuse issues, substance abuse issues. The pandemic was challenging in so many ways for our families, and it's hard to systematize support as a district with such varying complications. I think our homeless families were the ones that probably suffered the most due to the pandemic."

Amanda Clark, LBUSD social worker

Participants emphasized that the challenging circumstances created and exacerbated by the pandemic made it exceedingly difficult for school officials and staff members to develop and implement adequate response policies and practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

"A lot of what we've done this fall with the County Office of Education and MPUSD is helping to ensure that the amount of federal funding that is coming in for McKinney-Vento-identified students is being used, and used in the best possible ways, particularly for emergency shelter."

Jessica Parker, participant; California Director of the Compassionate Education Systems Team at the National Center for Youth Law

As expressed by Jessica Parker, funding, resources, and accessibility are crucial to supporting students and families impacted by homelessness. Due to the complex nature of homelessness and the various ways youth are impacted, collaboration across state and local entities is needed to ensure that young people are supported in the most optimal of ways. In terms of meeting both the educational and nonacademic needs of youth impacted by homelessness, we provide state- and county and district-level recommendations based on the professional evaluations of our participants.

STATE-LEVEL

Increased funding for supportive programs and services: Allocation of adequate funds to ensure the development, implementation, and proper maintenance of needed resources designed to support students impacted by homelessness. This includes specialized and tailored academic and nonacademic resources for students, as well as proper resourcing and support of staff and other officials such as counselors and liaisons who engage the homelessness challenge.

Increased & coordinated mental health services: School and other officials must be equipped to provide and facilitate access to mental health services for students impacted by homelessness. Procedures should include trauma-informed approaches as well as extension of services to families.

COUNTY AND DISTRICT-LEVEL

Emergency housing resources: District and county administrators should be able to responsively access emergency housing referrals for students and families experiencing homelessness.

Staffing: District and county administrators should provide additional personnel in schools sufficient to fully dedicate their time and expertise to engaging the student homelessness crisis. This includes increased accessibility of social workers, liaisons, and counselors.

Community collaborations: Partnerships and networks across resource entities and organizations should be established within local communities, especially collaborations with community and advocacy organizations that promote awareness regarding the rights of students experiencing homelessness and assist in directing individuals and families to emergency resources.

CONCLUSION

Youth homelessness is a complex and intersectional issue. Although the racial composition of students experiencing homelessness is diverse, the experience is nevertheless unevenly distributed *(Edwards, 2020; Edwards, 2021)*. Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and LGBTQ youth of all races experience homelessness at disproportionate rates *(Morton, Edwards, Kull, 2023)*. As such, educational policy in this area is a core equity concern. As noted, one in five housing-insecure students resides in California. The implementation of McKinney-Vento mandates alongside the California MTSS statewide initiative place California at the nexus of important policy responses.

This research brief focuses on the perspective and insights of district and county administrators charged with aspects of policy implementation in two California areas known for both higher rates of student homelessness and robust institutional response. Participants identified challenges in provisioning support that ranged from important gaps in district and local policies to less formal school practices, and social attitudes that collectively obstruct understanding and responsiveness to academic barriers. Nevertheless, study participants in these two heavily impacted areas also provided pivotal insights into effective practices to address the academic and wellness needs of students experiencing homelessness. Leveraging participants' pragmatic knowledge, the recommendations in this brief provide data-informed suggestions for state and local policymakers in terms of providing responsive supports for youth and families impacted by the ongoing national housing crisis.

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APPENDIX A

Table A1. LBUSD Participants

Interview Type	Participants: Role/Title
Focus Group	1. Director of Student Support Services and District Designated Homeless liaison 2. Lead District Social Worker 3. Social Worker in the Homeless Education Program
Interview	School Social Worker
Interview	Social Worker
Interview	Assistant Superintendent

APPENDIX B

Table B1. Monterey County Participants

District	Interview Type	Participants: Role/Title
Monterey	Interview	Program Coordinator for the Coalition of Homeless Services
Monterey	Interview	Senior Education Liaison (or Homeless Liaison, or McKinney-Vento Liaison)
Monterey	Interview	California Director of the Compassionate Education Systems Team at the National Center for Youth Law
Monterey	Interview	Teacher (on special assignment) and Homeless Liaison
Monterey	Interview	Program Manager for the Salinas Housing Advancement Resource and Education Center (SHARE Center)
San Lucas	Interview	Superintendent Principal (small district with one administrator, so they fill both roles)
Southbound Ray County Joint Union High School District	Interview	Alternative Education Coordinator and Foster Youth and Homeless Liaison
Salinas Union High School District	Interview	Director of Special Projects
Soledad Unified School District (part of South Monterey County)	Interview	District Intervention Coordinator
United Way Monterey County	Interview	Vice President of Resource Development
Monterey County	Interview	Program Coordinator for Homeless Children and Youth Services Program and County Coordinator Liaison