

“Known, Valued, Inspired”: New Evidence On Students Experiencing Homelessness

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About This Report

The University of Chicago Inclusive Economy Lab

Cities like Chicago fuel remarkable opportunity. At the same time, decades of disinvestment and discrimination create real barriers for young people growing up in many of our neighborhoods. Many in government and the non-profit sector are working to tackle these challenges. The Inclusive Economy Lab works with these partners to identify barriers to social mobility and racial equity, and to develop effective strategies for removing these barriers. Our work cuts across traditional policy domains, including education, workforce development, housing and cash assistance programs.

Acknowledgements

The Inclusive Economy Lab would like to acknowledge several partners who played instrumental roles in developing this report, particularly Molly Burke and Claire Bohmann of the Office of Student Support (OSSE) at Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and Chevelle Bailey, now of the Illinois Department of Children and Family and Services (DCFS). Their dedication to improving resources for students experiencing homelessness inspired this research and continues to shape the Inclusive Economy Lab's agenda on student homelessness. This work would not be possible without their support, and we thank CPS for agreeing to share its data for use in this research and for public dissemination in this report. We thank the current and former Inclusive Economy Lab employees who contributed to this report: Alejandro Ruizesparza, Ava Jurden, Carmelo Barbaro, Kenneth Hoffmeister, and Sarah Edelstein.

Additionally, the Inclusive Economy Lab would like to thank the practitioners and school staff at CPS who participated in our research or helped facilitate primary data collection. The Inclusive Economy Lab thanks the principals and staff of schools who participated in the Beating the Odds interviews. Their willingness to share their strategies with us has enabled the District to identify and scale practicable solutions for supporting homeless students. We thank the staff at La Casa Norte (North and South locations), McKay Elementary, Sullivan High School, Schurz High School, and YCCS Innovations, and Stacy Fox at Umoja Corporation for organizing focus groups with CPS students and caregivers. These practitioners went above and beyond to facilitate a relationship between researchers and CPS families, with one principal even walking her students from school to our downtown office.

This research was made possible by the generous support of the University of Chicago Women's Board, Crown Family Philanthropies, the Polk Bros. Foundation, and a gift from Scott Adelson in honor of his mother.

Perspectives of Lived Experience

Of the report authors, one experienced homelessness as a young adult. This same author has professional experience as a service provider working with young people experiencing homelessness. This perspective of "lived experience" helped frame the development of the Inclusive Economy Lab's research agenda and primary data collection protocols to ensure responsiveness to the voices and stories of youth and families experiencing homelessness.

Executive Summary

Some 1.5 million elementary and high school students nationally experience homelessness. In Chicago alone, nearly 18,000 students lack a stable place to call home.

Executive Summary

Some 1.5 million elementary and high school students nationally experience homelessness¹. In Chicago alone, nearly 18,000 students lack a stable place to call home.² Despite students' aspirations, their GPAs, attendance rates, and graduation rates lag those of similar students who are not experiencing homelessness.³ With the advent of remote learning during the pandemic, the gaps between stably housed and unstably housed children could widen even further.⁴ This has significant implications for racial equity given that 85 percent of students experiencing homelessness in Chicago identify as Black.⁵

While access to stable housing is critical to addressing many of the barriers that students experiencing homelessness face, federal policy does not consider housing an entitlement. Only one out of every five households that qualify for housing assistance are able to access it.⁶ Moreover, the vast majority of students experiencing homelessness are considered ineligible for the limited number of permanent housing units provided through the Continuum of Care. Teachers, staff, and school district administrators need an evidence-based toolkit for supporting homeless students in achieving their educational aspirations despite the additional barriers they face.

1 National Center for Homeless Education, 2020 Inclusive Economy Lab note: The data from schools' reporting show that nationally, the number of homeless children has gone from more than 650,000 in the 2004-5 school year to more than 1.5 million in 2017-18.

2 UChicago Urban Labs, 2018

3 Baharav et al., 2017

4 Slagter, 2020

5 Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 2018

6 Scally et al., 2018

PARTNERING WITH CPS

8 Findings

Pairing qualitative and quantitative insights, this report aims to provide actionable evidence for creating, testing, and scaling interventions to support students experiencing homelessness.

The Inclusive Economy Lab

partnered with the Chicago Public Schools (“CPS” or “the District”) to conduct an investigation into the causes and consequences of student homelessness in Chicago and potential strategies for supporting students experiencing homelessness within the school context.

Across these inquiries, we find that:

3 On average, students who experience homelessness exhibit **declines in GPA and attendance**, with high school students in shelter showing the largest impacts
pg. 32

1 Of students with four or more years in public school, roughly **13% experience homelessness at some point in their academic career**
pg. 14

2 **Black students have a one in four chance of experiencing homelessness** at some point during their academic tenure
pg. 16

6 Trauma, family unrest, housing instability, and a lack of economic opportunity pervade and undermine students' attempts to remain engaged in school
pg. 36

4 No uniform pattern of housing instability exists among students, though **a plurality of students experience episodes of instability** that resolve after one or two school years
pg. 33

5 The academic trajectories of students who experience homelessness vary across students and over time
pg. 35

7 Despite immense barriers, students experiencing homelessness value education and the experience of being in school
pg. 43

8 Seven strategies could help students experiencing homelessness beat the odds and stay engaged in school
pg. 49

Glossary

Cluster analysis: A technique to divide a population into several groups, such that each ‘cluster’ of individuals is characteristically distinct from other clusters. When employed, this method can reveal unexpected subgroupings of individuals with particular ‘stories’ that may not be highlighted through a manual partitioning process. Cluster analyses employ an unsupervised algorithmic approach; groupings are determined without researcher input, reducing the chance of author bias towards highlighting certain groupings. However, it should be noted the decision on which attributes the algorithm uses are instrumental in determining what groupings can feasibly appear from the data.

Continuum of Care (CoC): A U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) mandated coalition comprised of organizations and individuals who combat homelessness using coordinated and comprehensive approaches to housing and service provision for those experiencing homelessness within a defined geographic location, such as the city of Chicago.

“Doubled-up” versus “literal homelessness”: According to HUD, a homeless individual is one who “lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence,” which includes residence in a shelter or any place not meant for human habitation (HUD, 2017). This definition does not include families and individuals who are living “doubled up,” or sharing housing with others due to housing loss, economic hardship, etc. (HUD, 2017). As this report explores the question of student homelessness specifically, language throughout will adhere to the Department of Education (DOE) definition of homelessness, which is broader than HUD’s definition and includes those living double up. “Experiencing homelessness” or “experiencing housing instability” will be used interchangeably when referring to students living doubled-up. Students experiencing “literal homelessness” (i.e. accessing shelter or living in places not meant for human habitation, as defined by HUD) will be described only as “experiencing homelessness.”

Liaison: Staff appointed by school districts to serve students experiencing homelessness as the McKinney-Vento Act requires. These staff members are responsible for identifying residentially mobile students within their schools and providing them with basic educational supports (e.g., providing students with bus cards to travel to and from school).

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act: The primary federal legislation pertaining to the education of youth experiencing homelessness, originally implemented in 1987 and reauthorized in December 2015 (McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 1987). Subtitle VII-B, titled “Education for Homeless Children and Youths,” mandates that:

- (1) Each State educational agency shall ensure that each child of a homeless individual and each homeless youth has equal access to the same free, appropriate public education...as provided to other children and youths.

Glossary

- (2)** In any State where compulsory residency requirements or other requirements, in laws, regulations, practices, or policies, may act as a barrier to the identification of, or the enrollment, attendance, or success in school of, homeless children and youths, the State educational agency and local educational agencies in the State will review and undertake steps to revise such laws, regulations, practices, or policies to ensure that homeless children and youths are afforded the same free, appropriate public education as provided to other children and youths.
- (3)** Homelessness is not sufficient reason to separate students from the mainstream school environment.
- (4)** Homeless children and youths should have access to the education and other services that such children and youths need to ensure that such children and youths have an opportunity to meet the same challenging State academic standards to which all students are held.

Propensity score matching (PSM): A quasi-experimental method where a comparison group is determined via matching each treated individual to a non-treated individual, based upon shared characteristics. This match on observable characteristics may provide meaningful counterfactuals for the experience that the treated individual would have had without treatment. As such, a researcher can estimate the impact of an event using PSM. However, for this estimation to be accurate, we must assume that the characteristics we match upon are representative of unobserved variation in personal experience.

Sample summary: The dataset described in this report is comprised of **nine years of administrative data (SY09-10 through SY17-18)** from Chicago Public Schools on **800,000 students**. For each individual student, we receive access to annualized academic data, demographic characteristics, and information on their experience in the STLS program.

STLS: Students in temporary living situations (STLS) is CPS' identifier for students experiencing homelessness; these students are referred to in this report as students experiencing "homelessness" or "housing instability."

Unaccompanied Minor/Unaccompanied Youth: Youth experiencing homelessness who are not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian. There may be some overlap with children in the care of the state (i.e. foster care), though the term is not limited to this definition.

Introduction

Roughly one in twenty public school students in Chicago experience housing instability each year, the equivalent of one child in every classroom.

Student homelessness is on the rise. The number of elementary and high school students who experience homelessness in the U.S. has more than doubled since it was first tracked in the 2004-2005 school year, reaching 1.5 million students in the 2017-2018 school year (National Center for Homeless Education, 2020). In coming years that number may increase further as housing advocates across the country worry that the economic toll of the COVID-19 pandemic could lead to a “wave of homelessness” (Casey & Garcia Cano, 2020). In this environment, identifying and scaling effective interventions will be critical for supporting students experiencing homelessness.

Roughly one in twenty public school students in Chicago experience housing instability each year, the equivalent of one child in every classroom. The majority of these students are in families living doubled up; only about 13 percent of families experiencing homelessness access emergency shelter or other services from Chicago's homeless services sector (UChicago Urban Labs, 2018). Compared to their housed peers, students experiencing housing instability are more likely to exhibit lower attendance rates (Bassuk & Rubin, 1987; Buckner, 2008; Zima et al., 1994), higher rates of school transfer (Rafferty & Shinn, 1991), greater delays in reading achievement (Rafferty & Shinn, 1991; Rescorla et al., 1991; Zima et al., 1994), and poorer academic and social outcomes (Brumley et al., 2015; Fantuzzo et al., 2012, 2013; Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007; Herbers et al., 2012; Obradović et al., 2009).

The barriers that housing instability poses to children effectively engaging in school begin in early childhood and translate to increasingly concerning declines in educational outcomes as they grow older. Children experiencing homelessness have difficulties accessing programs like preschool and Head Start, are at higher risk of cognitive or developmental delays, and may be unable to obtain the personal records necessary for school enrollment (Brennan et al., 2014; Crowley, 2003). They exhibit higher rates of mental health conditions and behavioral problems, both of which can present challenges to engaging in a school setting (Thistle-Elliott, 2014). In fact, children who have experienced homelessness exhibit lower levels of both task and social engagement in school than similar children who are stably housed (Fantuzzo et al., 2012). Altogether, these challenges help explain why children experiencing homelessness are eventually more likely to drop out of school (Brennan et al., 2014).

Introduction

The McKinney-Vento Act, first passed in 1987, recognizes the unique challenges faced by students experiencing homelessness, particularly with regard to education. The objectives of McKinney-Vento suggest that interventions for students experiencing homelessness should focus on **promoting stability in education, ensuring access to education, and fostering academic success**. A large body of literature demonstrates, however, that some of these goals, particularly the last, remain out of reach for students 33 years after McKinney-Vento was passed. While this federal legislation provides crucial protection for students and families, school districts lack a road map for achieving its objectives.

Although students experiencing homelessness require – and are entitled to, per McKinney-Vento – supportive services to increase their odds of academic success, the evidence base of such interventions is small. The authors of this report are aware of only eleven randomized control trials (RCTs) that rigorously evaluate the impact of interventions on unstably housed students' outcomes (Baer et al., 2007; Cauce et al., 1998; Cutuli & Herbers, 2019; Gubits et al., 2016; Hyun et al., 2005; Mayberry et al., 2014; Peterson et al., 2006; Robinson et al., 2018; Shinn et al., 2015; Slesnick et al., 2007; Watts et al., 2018). While one of these studies uses school administrative attendance and state standardized test data, all others either did not evaluate academic outcomes or relied on parent-, teacher-, or student-report. None of these studies use school GPA data to evaluate academic outcomes.

To develop evidence-based and targeted supports, policymakers must first understand the characteristics and needs of students across the full spectrum of student homelessness.

Tittle-Elliott, 2014). Other researchers strongly recommend the integration of trauma-informed care that emphasizes establishing trusting and supportive relationships. By interacting with students and families on a more personal level, providers are better able to tailor supports (Bassuk et al., 2020). In general, several reports acknowledge that there remains a glaring absence of rigorous studies to inform the scaling of interventions (Altena et al., 2010; Samuels et al., 2015) – a gap which researchers have identified as “an alarming mismatch between investments in intervention and their evaluation” (Morton et al., 2019).

Mitigating this gap in the research requires a comprehensive approach. To develop evidence-based and targeted supports, policymakers must first understand the characteristics and needs of students across the full spectrum of student homelessness.

Introduction

Toward that aim, the Inclusive Economy Lab analyzed qualitative and quantitative data to explore the following key research questions:

Section 1. Equity and Impact

1. How many students are experiencing homelessness and how common is that experience among all students in CPS?
2. What are the demographics of students experiencing homelessness?
3. What is the impact of an experience of housing instability on a student's GPA and attendance?

Section 2. Profiles of Student Homelessness

4. What are the most common patterns and trajectories of housing instability among students?
5. How do the academic trajectories of students experiencing homelessness vary over time?

Section 3. In Their Words

6. What common barriers to engaging in school do students experiencing homelessness and their parents or guardians face?
7. What are the stories of students and parents or guardians in Chicago who have experienced homelessness, in their words?
8. What positive school attributes might counterbalance the challenges that students experiencing homelessness face outside of school?

Section 4. Helping Homeless Students Succeed

9. What are practices at schools where students experiencing homelessness are succeeding academically? How might these strategies support student engagement?

By rigorously investigating these questions, the Inclusive Economy Lab seeks to create a more complete picture of the experience of student homelessness and give policymakers and practitioners the information and tools they need to more effectively support them in achieving their aspirations.

Section 1. Equity and Impact

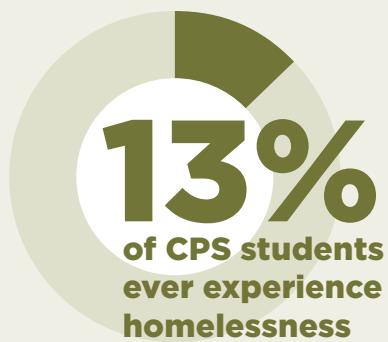
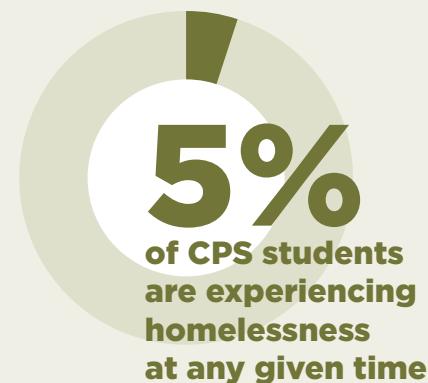
Public schools in Chicago are diverse. However, the demographics of the homeless student population differ markedly from the District in important ways.

How many students are experiencing homelessness?

At any one time, close to five percent of students in CPS are experiencing housing instability. This is the equivalent of more than one child in every classroom. However, among students who have been enrolled in public school for at least four years, 13 percent experienced homelessness at some point.



KEY FINDING 1: Roughly 13 percent of students⁷ with at least four years in public school experience homelessness at some point in their academic career.



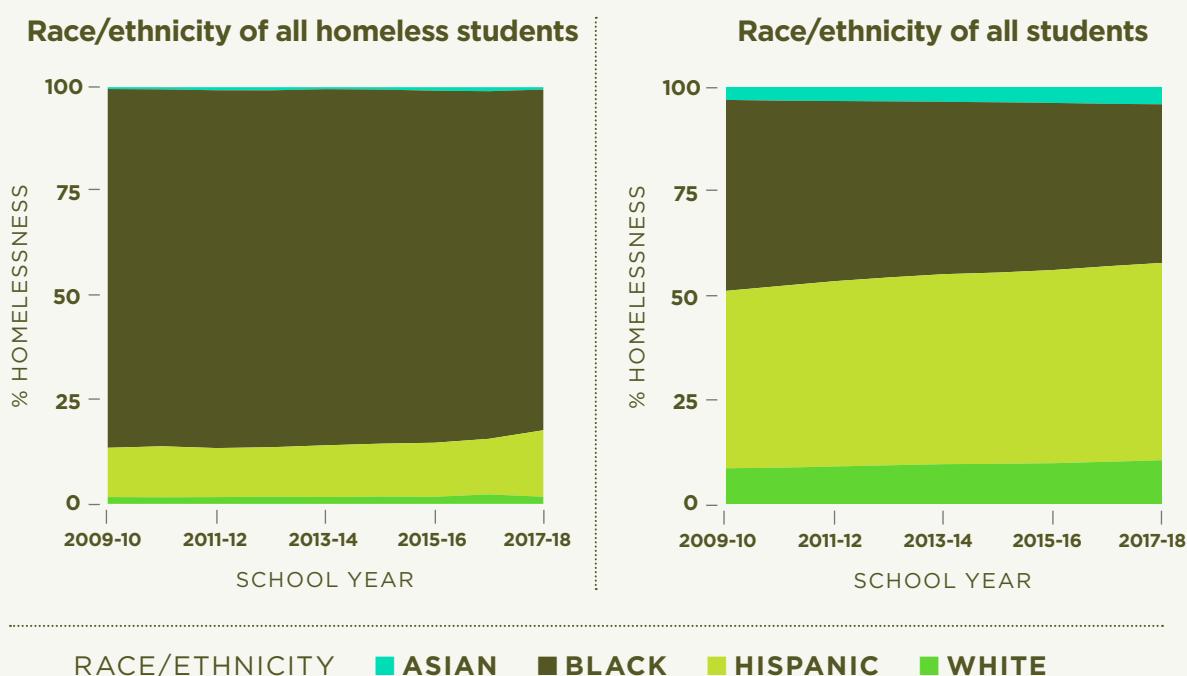
Although five percent is widely cited (Bowhay, 2014; CST, 2020) as the rate of student homelessness in CPS, it is a limited snapshot of only one year of academic data. To identify the likelihood of experiencing homelessness over the course of a student's academic career, the Inclusive Economy Lab examined whether a student has ever been identified as homeless across nine years of data (from SY 2009-10 to SY 2017-18). By capturing more years of student experience, the analysis was better able to identify experiences of homelessness among students. Sixty percent of students in this sample were enrolled in public school for four or more years. Of these students, more than one in 10 experienced homelessness.

⁷ Approximately 13% of students, or 60,380 of 470,141 in the sample, experienced homelessness at some point during at least four years in public school

What are the racial and ethnic demographics of homeless students?

Public schools in Chicago are diverse: 47 percent of students identify as Hispanic, 38 percent as Black, and 10 percent as White. However, the demographics of the homeless student population differ markedly from the District in important ways. While Hispanic students account for almost half of the student body, they comprise only 16 percent of all students experiencing homelessness in CPS. Black students, on the other hand, make up less than 40 percent of the student body, but account for over 80 percent of all students experiencing homelessness (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. Race/ethnicity of all homeless students compared to all students



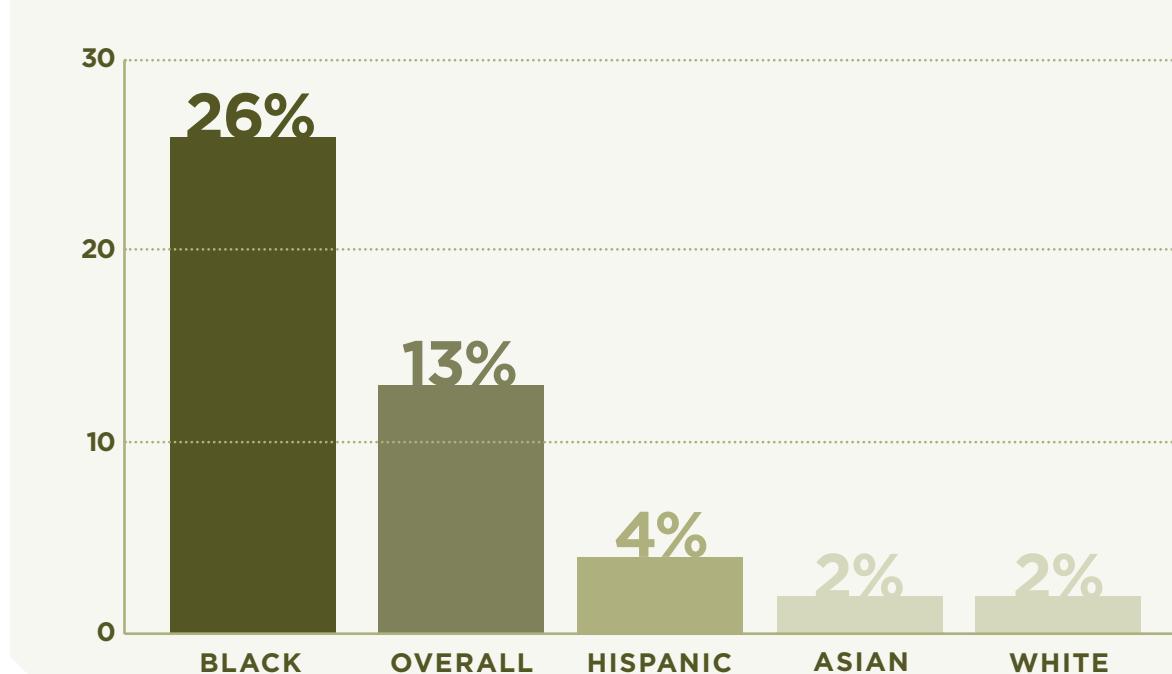
Section 1. Equity and Impact



KEY FINDING 2: Black students have a one in four chance of experiencing homelessness at some point during their academic tenure

Of all students who are enrolled in CPS for four or more years, the likelihood of experiencing homelessness varies across racial and ethnic identities. A quarter of all Black students experience homelessness at some point during their four (or more) year tenure, while fewer than five percent of Hispanic students and two percent of White and Asian students ever experience homelessness.

% of students experiencing homelessness at least once during their time in CPS

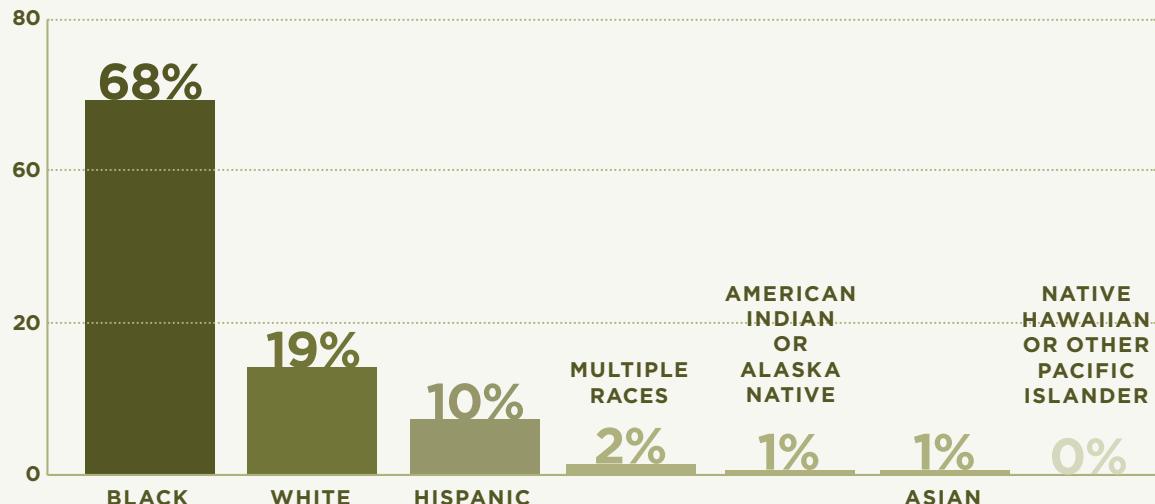


It is difficult to compare these racial/ethnic breakdowns to national rates of student homelessness, as the federal government does not require school districts to disaggregate student homelessness data by race (Edwards, 2020). To contextualize these findings, the Inclusive Economy Lab compiled three years of publicly available data from Chicago's Point-In-Time count, an annual assessment of number of Chicagoans experiencing "literal" homelessness at one moment in time (Department of Family and Support Services, 2020).

As of 2019, 77 percent of people experiencing homelessness in Chicago are Black, roughly 20 percent are White, and only 10 percent are Hispanic (Voorhees Center for Neighborhood and Community Improvement, 2019).

Section 1. Equity and Impact

FIGURE 2. Point-in-Time Count 3-Year Average of Race/Ethnicity*



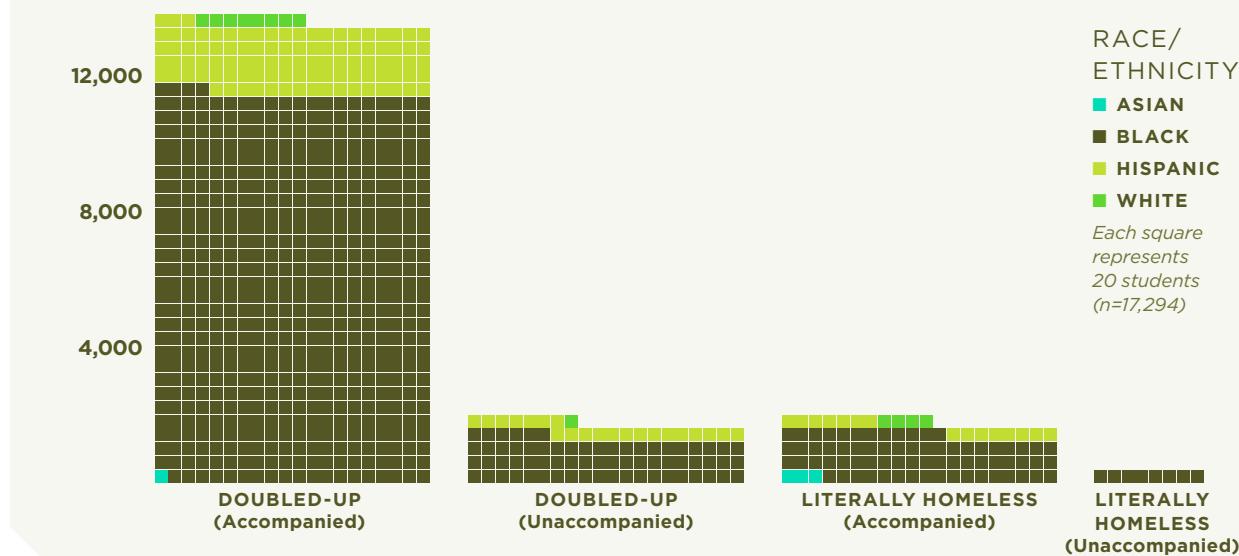
**Individuals may be represented in more than one category*

It is important to note that literally homeless students comprise only a small portion of all students experiencing homelessness. Students experiencing homelessness primarily live doubled-up with their parent or guardian (i.e. “accompanied”), as shown in Figure 3 below. This distribution mirrors national estimates of the types of housing instability students experience (Henry et al., 2020).⁸ Disaggregating this data by race and ethnicity reveals that Black students are overrepresented across every type of housing instability.

⁸ According to HUD data from SY2017-2018 on 1,508,265 enrolled homeless students, 25.9 percent of students are in shelter or awaiting foster care placement, unsheltered, or living in a hotel or motel (“literally homeless”); seventy-five percent of students are living doubled-up. In the same year, 8.6 percent of students were living unaccompanied (Henry et al., 2020).

Section 1. Equity and Impact

FIGURE 3. Living Situations of Homeless Students by Race/Ethnicity, SY17-18



Among Hispanic students who are experiencing housing instability, a disproportionately high percentage live doubled-up without their parent or legal guardian, i.e. “unaccompanied.” Hispanic students account for 23.6% of doubled up unaccompanied students, but only 12.7% of students experiencing homelessness overall. Unaccompanied status is not a designation for students involved in foster care, although it is sometimes used in that way. Formal guidance suggests that a school marks a child “unaccompanied” if the child is unstably housed and living with someone who is not their parent or legal guardian.



POLICY INSIGHT

Black students are more likely to experience homelessness than any other racial group. Policymakers designing interventions to support students experiencing homelessness might consider outcome metrics specifically aimed at reducing the number of Black students experiencing homelessness.

What are the scholastic characteristics of homeless students?

As highlighted in Table 1 below, students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are overrepresented among students experiencing homelessness, while students who are English Language Learners (ELL) are underrepresented. Among school types, Charter schools and high schools see disproportionately higher rates of student homelessness compared to District and Elementary schools, respectively. A quarter of all students in Options schools,⁹ which serve students who are at-risk of dropping out, experienced homelessness at some point in SY2017-18.

TABLE 1. Demographics of Homeless Students as Compared to Overall Student Body

Student Characteristic SY17-18	Students (#)	Students (%)	Homeless (#)	Homeless (%)
All students (Pre-K – 12th)	378,228	100%	17,447	4.6%
Female Students	186,818	49%	9,212	53%
ELL Students	69,594	18.4%	1,099	6.3%
IEP Students	56,963	15.1%	3,492	20.0%
Early Childhood (Pre-K)	22,165	5.9%	613	3.5%
Elementary (K-6)	168,690	44.6%	6,194	35.5%
Junior High (7-8)	86,993	23.0%	3,106	17.8%
High School (9-12)	118,007	31.2%	7,520	43.1%
ALOP Students	3,851	1.0%	523	3.0%
Charter Students	56,915	15.0%	4,299	24.6%
Contract Students	2,800	0.7%	635	3.6%
District Students	311,155	82.3%	11,884	68.1%
Options students	9,641	2.5%	2,444	25.3%

⁹ According to CPS, District Options schools serve high school students in “restricted environments” or students in need of “educational alternatives” (Chicago Public Schools, 2019).

What is the impact of experiencing homelessness on academic performance?

To assess the impact of a first-time experience of homelessness on students' attendance and GPA, the Inclusive Economy Lab conducted propensity score matching analyses. These analyses compare the attendance and academic outcomes of students, both at elementary and high schools, who were identified as homeless in the 2018-2019 school year to similar students who were not. Similarity was determined using multiple demographics including gender, race, IEP status, ELL status, age, school type, number of schools attended, attendance and GPA. This particular analytic method can shed light on how the performance of students who were identified as homeless for the first time compares to how they might have performed had they not experienced homelessness that school year. While this approach provides insight into how the first year of housing instability affects academic performance on average, it is important to note that it masks a reasonable degree of variation in the academic trajectories of students experiencing homelessness over time, which we explore in more detail in Section 2 of this report.¹⁰



KEY FINDING 3: On average, students who experience homelessness exhibit declines in GPA and attendance, with high school students in shelter showing the largest impacts.

On average, both elementary and high school students who experienced homelessness for the first time in the 2018-2019 school year saw the effects of this experience in their attendance. Relative to comparison students who were not identified as homeless, high school students who experienced homelessness for the first time missed 6.6 more days of instruction per year. This number increases to over eight days if a student was experiencing homelessness while unaccompanied (Figure 4).

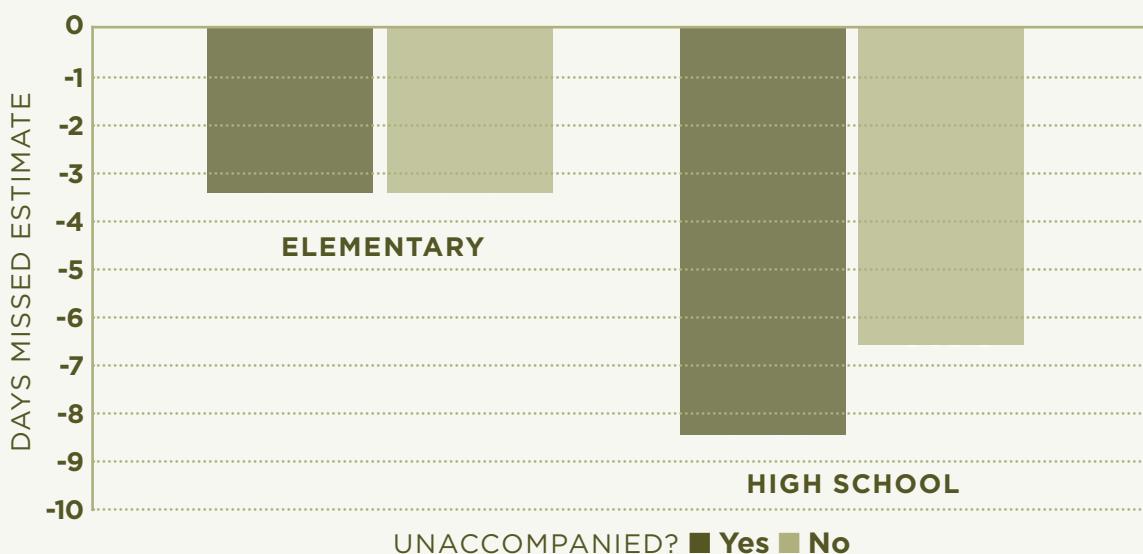
Elementary school students who were identified as homeless for the first time missed about three more days of instruction per school year than comparison students who

¹⁰ There is a minor difference in methodology between the attendance and GPA calculations based on the availability of daily attendance data, as opposed to quarterly grades information available. In attendance outcome calculations, students are matched for analysis starting the exact day they were recorded as becoming homeless, whereas GPA calculations require students are matched on a yearly basis. Generally, the attendance results will present more accurate estimates of the impact of homelessness due to this difference.

Section 1. Equity and Impact

were not identified as homeless. The impact of homelessness on attendance was similar for accompanied and unaccompanied elementary school students (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. Impact of Initial Homeless Identification on Attendance by Unaccompanied Status and School Level, SY2018-19



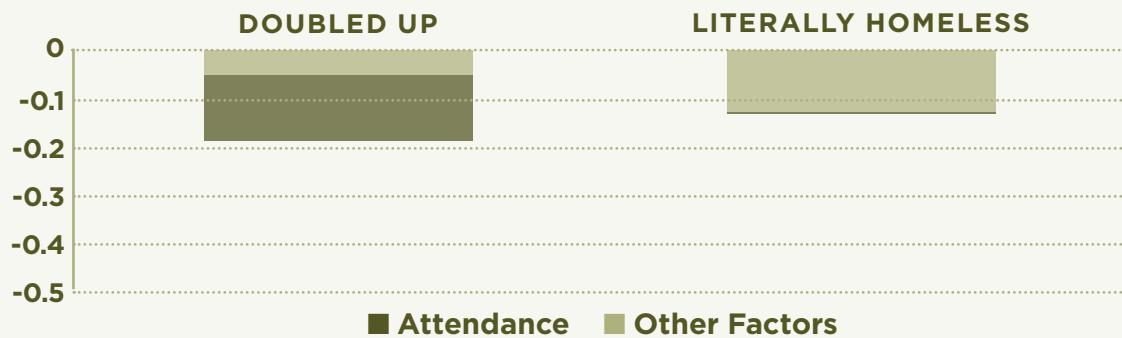
Students experiencing homelessness in elementary and high school were also more likely to experience a gap in school enrollment of a day or more during their first year being identified as homeless, which is not accounted for in the attendance rates above. Among elementary school students, those experiencing homelessness were three times more likely to experience a gap in enrollment than matched peers (14.8 percent versus 4.8 percent). This amounted to two more days of missed instruction on average. This difference was also substantial among high school students, with 28.3 percent of those experiencing homelessness experiencing a gap of a day or more in enrollment as compared to 15.8 percent among their peers.¹¹

Experiencing homelessness also takes a toll on students' GPAs. Overall, elementary school students who were experiencing homelessness for the first time experienced an average decrease in GPA of 0.15 points, which is equivalent to a decline of half a grade (for example, going from B+ to B) in one or two classes (Figure 5).

¹¹ This analysis removes students who left the school district via a verified transfer or reported graduating from a CPS high school or another qualifying graduation program (e.g. IEP study). Enrollment stints that ended before the CPS school year concluded without a valid school exit reason were also included based on the number of days between the student's withdrawal and the last day of the CPS school calendar.

Section 1. Equity and Impact

FIGURE 5. Impact of Initial Homeless Identification on Elementary Students' GPA, SY2017-18

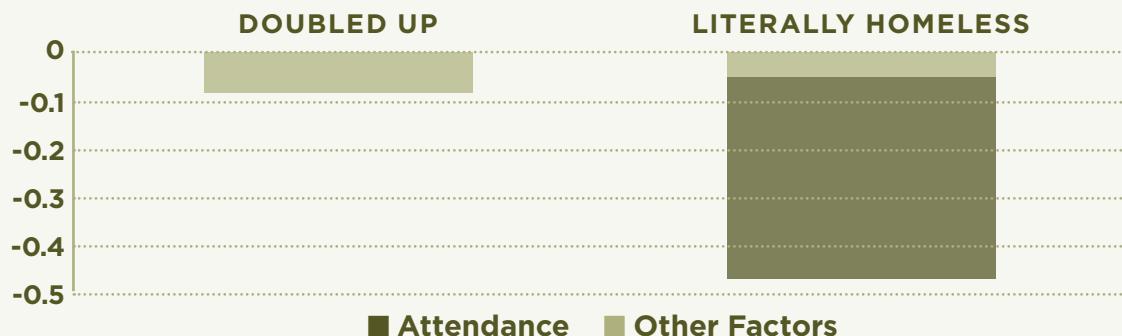


For elementary school students who were identified as literally homeless, negative impacts to their GPA result almost entirely from lower attendance. For elementary school students living doubled up, negative impacts on GPA persist even after controlling for attendance. This difference in the relationship between attendance and GPA suggests that there may be significant differences in the experiences of being doubled up versus being literally homeless.

For high school students, the story shifts. As shown in Figure 6 below, the same analysis on data for high school students identified as homeless for the first time indicates that the GPAs of high school students who are literally homeless experience drastic declines regardless of their attendance status. These students demonstrate a 0.46 drop in GPA after their first year as STLS (the equivalent of going from an A to a C in one class). Attendance is only responsible for about 11.4 percent of this drop. For high school students who are living doubled up, unlike their elementary school counterparts, the effects of homelessness on GPA can be attributed entirely to missing more days of school.

Section 1. Equity and Impact

FIGURE 6. The Impact of Initial Homeless Identification on High Schoolers' GPA, SY2017-18



POLICY INSIGHT

Absences account for some, but not all, of the GPA disparities between homeless and stably housed students. School administrators might work with shelter staff and outside providers to ensure high school students who are experiencing literal homelessness have access to Wi-Fi and a quiet place to do their homework each night.

In addition to negatively affecting attendance rates and GPA, our analyses also show that high school students who experience homelessness are less likely to graduate from high school. As compared to their stably housed matched peers with similar 8th grade academic experiences, 1.8 percent fewer high school students experiencing homelessness graduate high school within five years.^{12,13}

POLICY INSIGHT

High school students experiencing homelessness graduate from high school at lower rates compared to their stably housed peers, suggesting that challenges associated with homelessness persist into early adulthood. Students might benefit from targeted supports that help ensure they graduate high school and are able to access postsecondary opportunities.

¹² Students are match via an inverse propensity score weighting in 8th grade (2013) looking at IEP status, ELL status, gender, race and ethnicity, the number of schools attended that year, age at the start of the year, GPA, enrollment rate, and attendance rate. Due to constraints of the sample, no transfer students (in or out) are included in this calculation, meaning this may over- or undercount the impact of homelessness in high school for transfer students.

¹³ These calculations include any student whose status was registered as "graduated from a Chicago Public High School." Students are included in the "experienced homelessness" group if they were registered as homeless at any point in their high school career. Students who transferred out of the district or to a Chicago non-public high school were not included. Students who transferred to another Chicago Public High School or to a correctional institution were included.

Section 2. Profiles of Student Homelessness

Students experiencing homelessness may differ from one another in a variety of ways, suggesting a need for tailored and targeted interventions.

Section 2. Profiles of Student Homelessness

The above analyses reinforce available research on the impact of an experience of homelessness on a student's academic record and the disparities between housed and homeless students (Cutuli et al., 2013; Herbers et al., 2012; Obradović et al., 2009; Voight et al., 2012). However, students experiencing homelessness may differ from one another in a variety of ways, suggesting a need for tailored and targeted interventions. In designing services for these students, policymakers may benefit from better understanding common profiles of students experiencing homelessness, including how students' housing instability changes over time and whether those changes are also associated with shifts in academic engagement.

As the following sections will describe, the experiences of students experiencing homelessness are far from uniform. Cluster analyses indicate that students' experiences with housing instability and their academic trajectories meaningfully vary over time. A portion of students persist or demonstrate resilience in their academic outcomes, even in the face of the immense challenges that an early experience with homelessness can present. These profiles can serve as guideposts for policymakers and school administrators looking to target their supports or implement preventive outreach to support students who may be at risk of homelessness.

What are the most common patterns of housing instability among students?

To better understand student trajectories, the Inclusive Economy Lab conducted a longitudinal cluster analysis to identify the most common patterns of housing instability that students experienced, following cohorts of students over time from 2009 to 2018. The clustering algorithm utilized several aspects of students' housing histories to construct these profiles, including the number of years students were enrolled as experiencing homelessness, the age of their first and last years identified in their schools' homelessness program, descriptions of their dwelling type (e.g. living doubled up, in emergency shelter, unsheltered, etc.), and their unaccompanied status. To ensure adequate sample size, the analysis followed students through two grade ranges to identify common profiles: from kindergarten through 6th grade, and from 6th grade through 12th grade. From each of these age groups, five common student profiles emerged. Four out of five profiles are common to both age groups; the fifth and sixth variant profiles are highlighted in Figure 8 below.

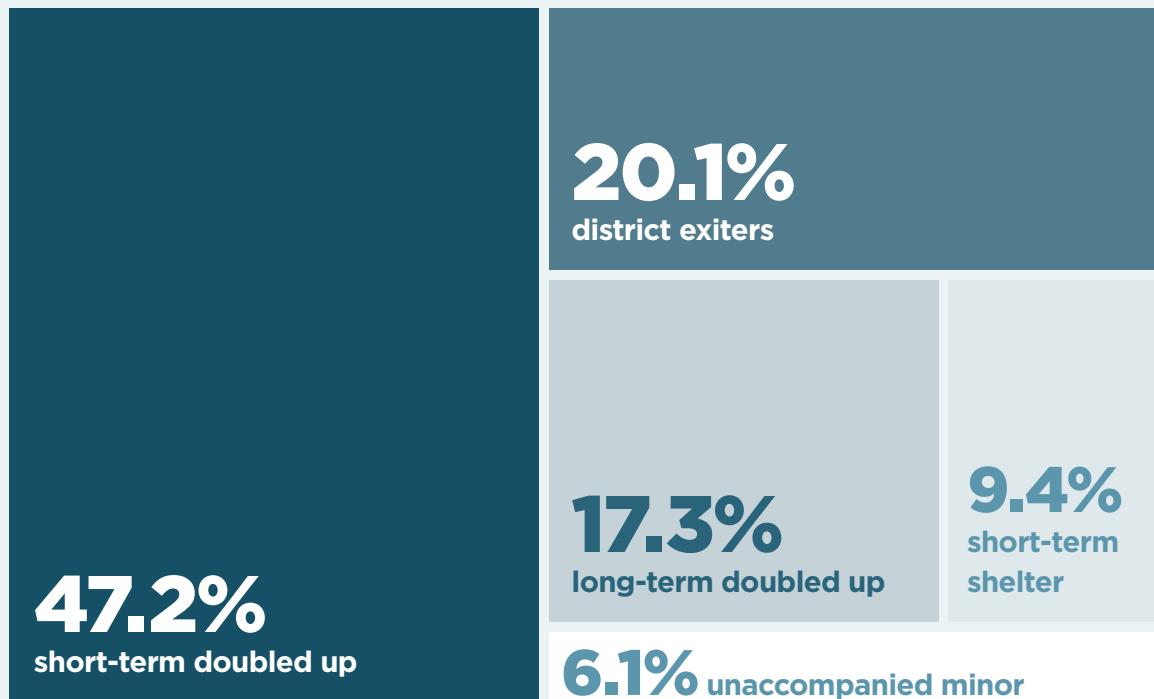


KEY FINDING 4: No uniform pattern of housing instability exists among students, though a plurality of students experience episodes of instability that resolve after one or two school years.

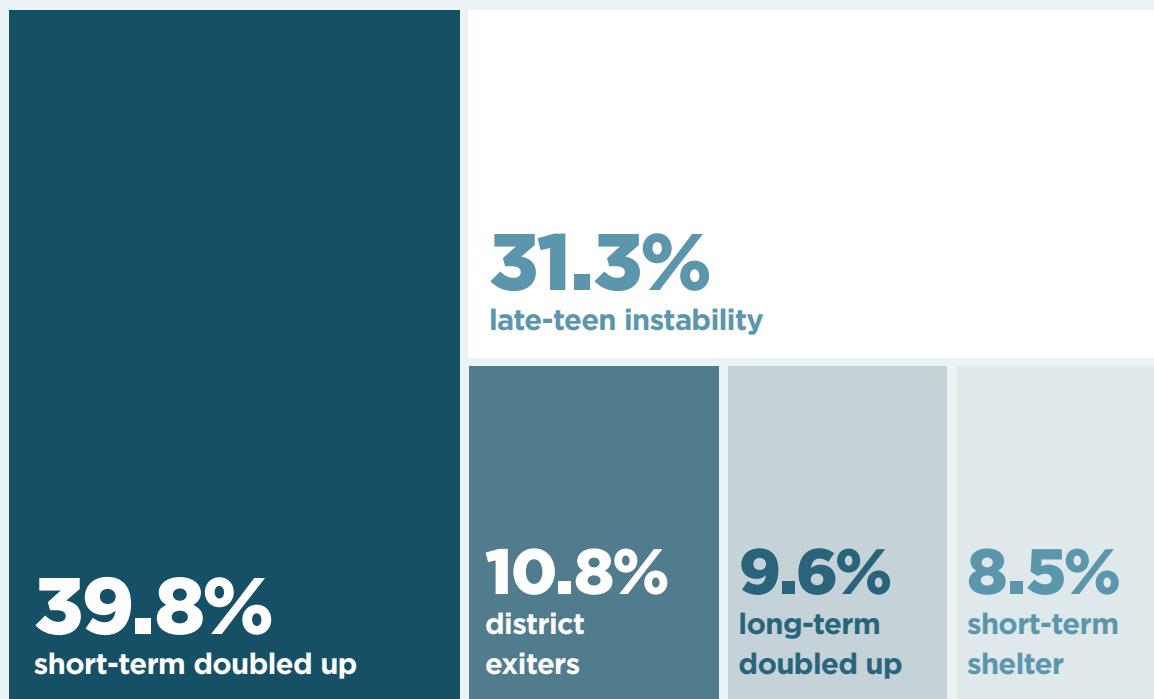
Section 2. Profiles of Student Homelessness

FIGURE 8. Profiles of Student Housing Instability Over Time (SY2009-10—SY2017-18)

Younger Students (K-6th grade)



Older Students (6-12th grade)



Profile Descriptions

Short-term doubled-up	The largest group of students are those experiencing short-term housing instability. These students tend to experience a year or two of living doubled-up before returning to sustained housing stability. Older students in profile 6 (“Late-teen instability”) may also be experiencing short-term bouts of living doubled-up, but because they enter homelessness in the last two years of school it is not possible to track their trajectories beyond these two years.
District exiters	In the second largest profile, most students are identified as experiencing homelessness for a single year before transferring out of CPS or dropping out altogether. Most students with this profile face an unusually high level of instability, experiencing both school mobility and homelessness. Because only one year of data is available for these students, future Inclusive Economy Lab research may seek to link Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) data to available administrative data to learn more about students’ trajectories.
Long-term doubled-up	The majority of students in this profile live doubled-up for multiple consecutive years (typically three or more school years). While their long-term instability may be cause for concern, these students also demonstrate a consistent engagement with school. These students receive access to schools’ supports for homeless students, including free bus cards, basic school and hygiene supplies, and staff oversight.
Short-term shelter	As in Profile 1, most students in Profile 4 experience a short-term episode of housing instability that typically resolves within a single school year, although this group experiences literal homelessness. As most students in the short-term shelter profile are experiencing literal homelessness, they might face greater household instability than students who are living doubled up for short periods of time.
Unaccompanied minor	This profile only exists among children in kindergarten through sixth grade, and heavily features young students who briefly live apart (or “unaccompanied” ¹⁴) from their parent or guardian. Some of these students may be staying with a relative while their parent secures a stable living arrangement, while others may have been placed in foster care.
Late-teen instability	In Profile 6, a sizable group of high-school upperclassmen experience housing instability for the first time in their academic career, primarily living doubled-up. These older teenagers may begin living doubled-up for a variety of reasons, none of which are discernible from the data. Some may be moving in voluntarily with a partner, while others may instead be struggling with parental conflict and leave home of their own accord. Some parental conflict may also result in a non-voluntary exit from the home, as can be the case with LGBTQ young adults who are at more than double the risk of homelessness than their peers (Morton & Dworsky, 2018).

¹⁴ Unaccompanied status does not indicate a child is a Ward of the State or living without any adult guardian. Instead, it is the label schools use to identify children who aren’t currently living with their parent or legal guardian

How do the academic trajectories of students experiencing homelessness vary over time?

While on average students' first year of housing instability leads to declines in attendance and GPA, how and when housing instability affects student outcomes is likely to vary over time. Some students may experience instability that affects their attendance and GPA prior to their first year of homelessness, while other students may benefit from protective factors that lead to resilience in their academic performance. To better understand this variation, the Inclusive Economy Lab conducted a cluster analysis following four years of GPA and attendance outcomes for students experiencing homelessness: the two years preceding the year a student is identified as experiencing homelessness, the first year of identification, and the year following identification. Together with the earlier academic findings, the analyses below can provide a more well-rounded understanding of how students' academic trajectories change over time. This analysis reveals that much like students' patterns of housing instability, academic trajectories are not uniform across all students experiencing homelessness.



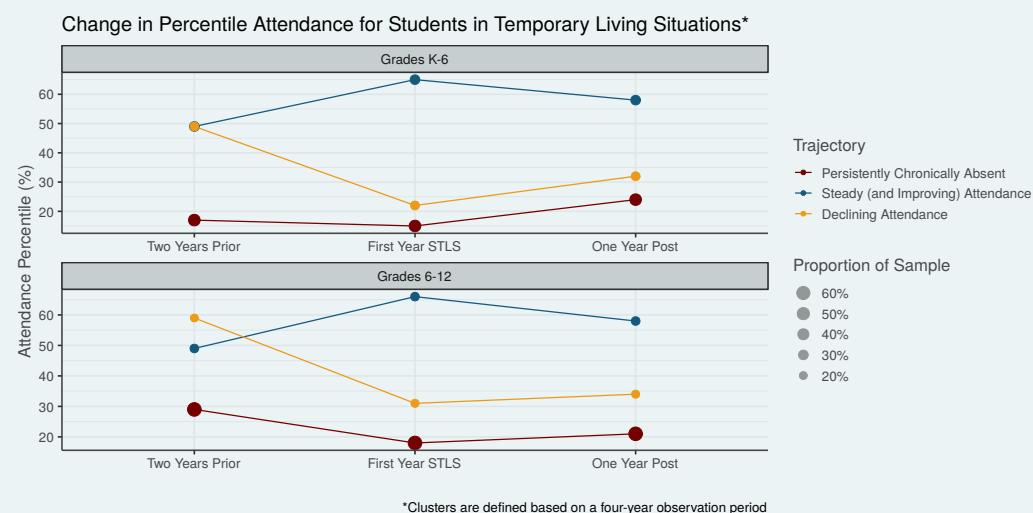
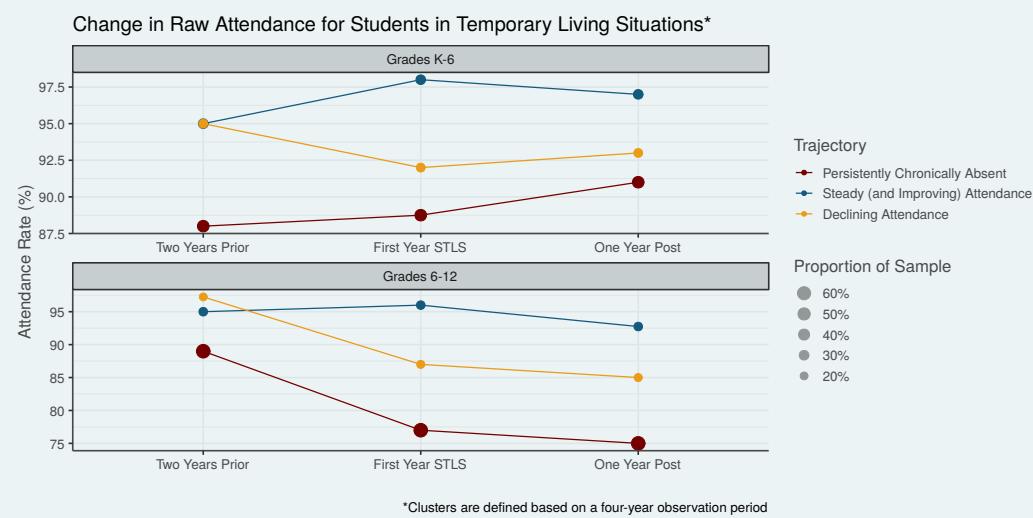
KEY FINDING 5: The academic trajectories of students who experience homelessness vary across students and over time. A plurality of students persistently struggle academically, while others demonstrate resilience or declines in academic performance once identified as experiencing homelessness.

It is important to note that the year in which a student is first identified as experiencing homelessness does not necessarily align with the start of housing instability in that student's life. Many families are highly mobile or have been in an unstable living situation for a period of time prior to losing access to their own housing and moving in with family and friends or accessing emergency shelter.

Attendance

While students experiencing homelessness on average missed more days of instruction than their stably housed peers in the first year that they experienced homelessness, a closer look at changes in students' attendance standing¹⁵ over time reveals three distinct trajectories, as shown in Figure 9 and described in more detail below.

FIGURE 9. Change in raw and percentile attendance for Students in Temporary Living Situations (four-year observation period)



15 "Attendance standing" refers to a student's attendance relative to other students in their grade, including both those experiencing homelessness and those not. Attendance standing is measured using students' percentile rank relative to others in their entire grade. This metric provides a clearer picture of a student's attendance trajectory by accounting for natural fluctuations in attendance rates that may occur from grade to grade.

Section 2. Profiles of Student Homelessness

- (1) Persistently chronically absent:** Almost half of housing unstable younger students (45.3% of the sample, grades K - 6) and two out of three housing unstable older students (62.9%, grades 6 - 12), are persistently chronically absent from school over the entire four-year observational period, even prior to experiencing homelessness. Younger students on average are missing one out of every ten school days. Once older students are identified as experiencing homelessness, their attendance rate declines even further, eventually missing at least one out of every five school days.
- (2) Steady (and improving) attendance rate:** A minority of students - roughly one in three housing unstable younger students (30.6%, grades K-6) and one in five housing unstable older students (20.9%, grades 6-12) - attend school at close to the district average rate prior to experiencing homelessness. Once identified as experiencing homelessness, these students' attendance improves compared to their same-aged peers.
- (3) Declining attendance rate:** Roughly one in four housing unstable younger students (24.1%) and one in six housing unstable older students (16.2%) are attending school at or above the average rate prior to experiencing homelessness, but then experience a sharp decline in attendance compared to their same-aged peers once experiencing homelessness. The decline in attendance rate is more pronounced for high school students, who eventually become chronically absent, missing more than one in ten days of school.

Students in the largest group ("Persistently chronically absent") are disproportionately enrolled in IEPs (22.8% of younger students, 21.6% of older students) in their first year identified. The older students in this group are also slightly more likely to indicate that they are unaccompanied (20.1% compared to 14-18% for other groups). These attributes may serve as helpful heuristics for schools to identify students who may benefit from more involved support than what currently exists.



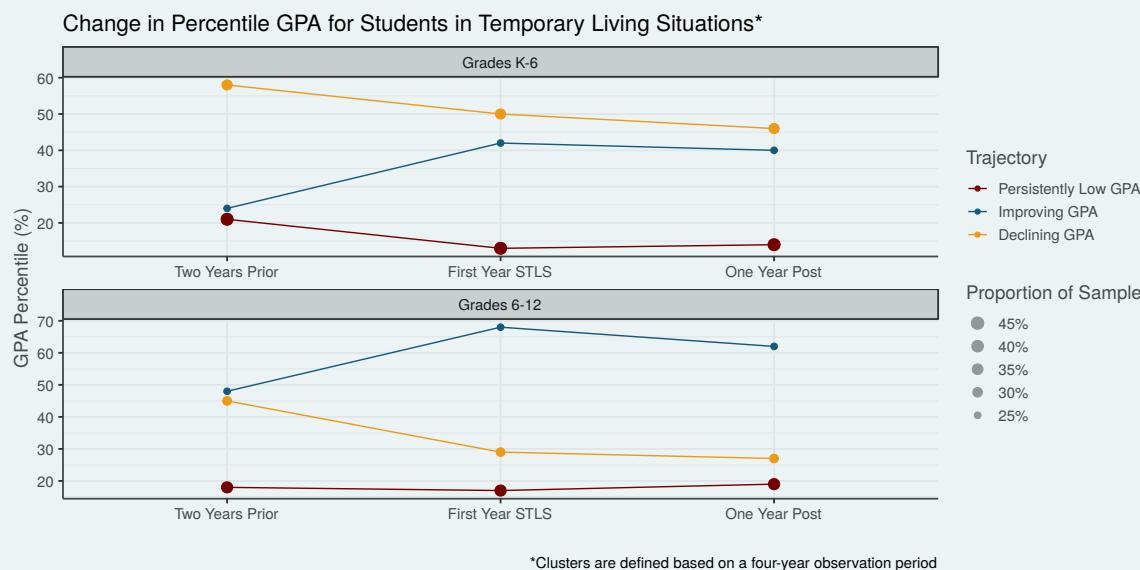
POLICY INSIGHT

On average, older students experiencing homelessness experience larger declines in their attendance rate than younger students experiencing homelessness. It may be beneficial for schools to target older students experiencing homelessness when developing attendance-based supports.

GPA

Cluster analyses indicate that the GPAs of students experiencing homelessness follow three common trajectories relative to their same-age peers, as shown in Figure 10 and described in more detail below:

FIGURE 10. Change in GPA percentiles for Students in Temporary Living Situations (four-year observation period)



- (1) **Persistently low GPA:** Almost half of housing unstable younger students (44.1%) and roughly one out of three housing unstable older students (38%) persistently have GPAs in the bottom quartile of the distribution of their same-aged peers, even prior to experiencing homelessness. Elementary students in this group experience a further decline in GPA relative to their peers once identified as experiencing homelessness.
- (2) **Improving GPA:** Approximately one in four housing unstable students (26% of both younger and older students) demonstrate an improvement in their GPAs in the time after their identification. These improvements may reflect the positive effects of a combination of factors to which the data cannot directly speak, including the supports associated with being identified as homeless.

Section 2. Profiles of Student Homelessness

(3) Declining GPA: Approximately a third of housing unstable students (30% of K-6 students, 36% of 6-12 students) are maintaining a GPA around the district average prior to experiencing homelessness and then demonstrate a decline in GPA compared to their peers once identified. This decline is steeper for older students. While elementary students in this cluster maintain a GPA around district average even after being identified as experiencing homelessness, older students decline to the bottom third of the distribution among their same-aged peers.



POLICY INSIGHT

Although an experience of homelessness negatively impacts students' GPA and attendance on average, these effects are not distributed evenly. A minority of students persist or even improve their academic performance upon being identified as homeless. This variation suggests that resources associated with identification (e.g. bus cards, socio-emotional resources) may be key to keeping some students engaged, while other students likely need more robust supports.

Section 3. In Their Words

“There’s so many things that I want to do. So, I figured like throughout the years I’m going to just try to do them all, like just taking one step at a time.”

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Section 3: In Their Words

The quantitative analyses explored in the report thus far highlight the variation in the patterns of housing instability that students face, as well as how these unique experiences manifest in different academic trajectories over time. To help develop a more nuanced view of the challenges homeless students face, qualitative investigations enable researchers to identify “the subtle, often invisible social mechanisms” that may contribute to these differences (Carter & Reardon, 2014). The Inclusive Economy Lab partnered with school administrators and staff, as well as providers at local homeless shelters and drop-in facilities in Chicago, to organize seven focus groups with current and recent public-school students, as well as parents of students who were experiencing homelessness.

Although recruitment focused on convening focus groups with diversity in geography, age, and housing type, there are some important caveats to note when interpreting these findings. Given the relatively small size of the participant population¹⁶, some findings may not be generalizable to the larger population of students experiencing homelessness. It is possible that students and parents or guardians who volunteered to participate in a focus group had been experiencing housing instability for a longer period of time and were therefore better known to the school staff and service providers who helped organize the groups.

¹⁶ Focus groups had 42 participants in total, 33 of whom were current or former public-school students, nine of whom were parents of current public-school students

What common barriers to engaging in school do students experiencing homelessness and their parents face?

Focus group participants were prompted to share their thoughts on what they want to be when they “grow up,” what they liked and disliked about their schools (e.g., subjects, teachers, etc.), their out-of-school lives, what might have made them feel more supported while in school, and what they would have told their younger selves. Students spoke of their dreams of owning their own businesses, becoming veterinarians, teachers, and professional athletes. However, the challenges associated with homelessness often impeded attempts to achieve these goals.

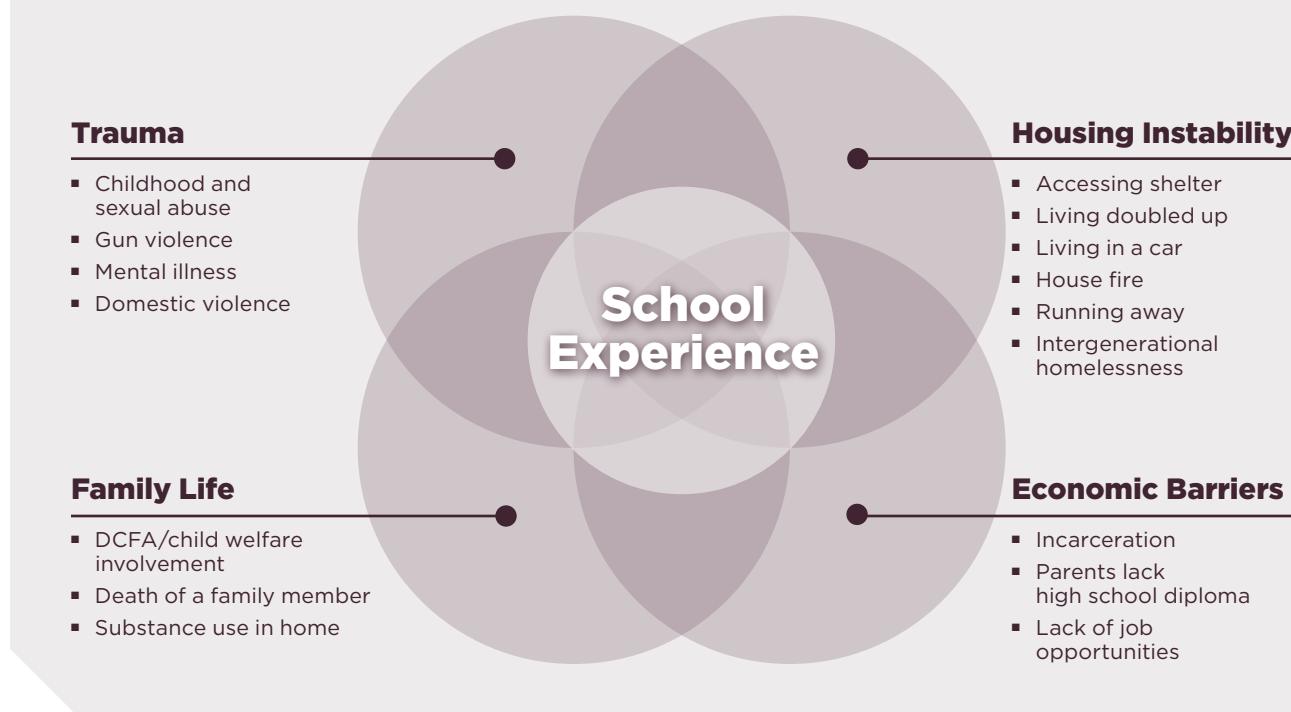


KEY FINDING 6: Trauma, family unrest, housing instability, and a lack of economic opportunity pervade and undermine students' attempts to remain engaged in school.

The focus groups surfaced a high level of unaddressed trauma among both students and parents experiencing homelessness, with participants making a direct connection between these experiences and behavioral challenges at school. In addition to discussions about school experiences, conversations about participants’ lives outside of school dominated every focus group. Students and parents alike answered school-related questions with stories about a personal struggle or challenge occurring outside of school. This context made evident that an experience of homelessness cannot easily be relegated to one aspect of a student’s life.

Section 3: In Their Words

FIGURE 11. Four Areas of Vulnerability Undergird Student Experiences



From analyses of focus group transcripts, four common areas of vulnerability emerged across both parent and student focus groups. Each bullet point under the four vulnerability areas highlighted in Figure 11 describes an experience that was explicitly mentioned by one or more focus group participants. This context provides insight into factors beyond attendance which may drive the impacts of homelessness on students' GPAs and graduation rates described in Sections 1 and 2.



POLICY INSIGHT

The challenges students and parents face outside of school are intersecting and pervasive (see Figure 11). As such, policies and interventions focused solely on educational outcomes may be insufficient to support them. To ensure that all students are given the opportunity to succeed, policymakers and providers must design a network of supports that extend beyond the school door.

What are the stories of students and parents in Chicago who have experienced homelessness?

Case studies that exemplify these four areas of vulnerability are presented below, featuring direct quotes from four focus group participants. While the participants' stories below intend to highlight only one of the four vulnerability areas, their lives cannot be categorized as neatly. As shown in Figure 11 above, the common themes heard in the focus groups overlap with one another in multiple, complex ways. Many instances of trauma coincide with familial strife; similarly, barriers to economic opportunity are often intricately related to experiences of housing instability. The stories below were selected for this report due to their level of detail and representativeness of the four vulnerability areas. All names have been changed to pseudonyms¹⁷ to protect the privacy of the participants.

¹⁷ It should be noted that three of the four participants highlighted below participated in groups that were organized by youth emergency shelter providers. Because these participants were accessing services for youth experiencing literal homelessness, and because they were no longer enrolled in school, their experiences should not be considered representative of all students experiencing homelessness. Instead, their stories should underscore that there is no single, uniform experience of student homelessness.

Trauma Angelina's Story

Of the focus group participants, 28 percent reported experiencing sexual or physical violence as children. Angelina is a young Black woman in her early twenties. She has young children who she describes as the most important part of her life; they are experiencing homelessness together at the time of the focus group. During her academic tenure, she engaged with the foster care system and left high school before graduating. Angelina told us the following about her experiences in school. Phrases in brackets are researcher summaries highlighting relevant information shared by the participant that could not be succinctly quoted:

I had a few schools try to put me in Special Ed for my behavior problems, because I was getting abused and sexually abused and stuff....My momma's husbands they used to molest me and s*.... My own [mother] threatened to kill me.**

Briefly in my first high school I went to [school].... I think all schools should be like [my school]. It had like advisory, probably like small groups, you know – a person to talk to, you know, different groups of children. That way everybody talking to a counselor or talking to somebody to help you out with your problem. And I feel like they used to have like peace circles to keep the peace down, like probably to have like peace days. I feel like [my school] is the best school in Chicago.

[Angelina enters foster care in high school]

I would come to school and act out when people would say anything to me or when people start talking about sex, I just go the f* off...I used to get picked on for a lot of different things...But, I'm defending myself. This b**** corner me in a room but I'm trying to shove my way past, but I'm in the wrong because she's trying to corner me, she trying to move me. But I ended up going to jail.**

I regret leaving high school, but then I ended up getting pregnant, and I dropped out.

Angelina suggests that her experiences of sexual abuse led to her being triggered in school “when people [started] talking about sex.” These moments of being triggered led to fights, and eventually an arrest. She regrets dropping out of high school and feels constrained by her lack of diploma. However, Angelina does not focus her story on her experiences of housing instability. For her, housing instability is not the sole source of difficulty in her life, but instead is an ongoing issue that makes the challenges of her life, and her desire to be a good parent, that much harder.

Housing Instability Lilith's Story

Focus group participants experience both literal homelessness and living doubled-up, with many individuals having experienced both living situations. Among the 42 participants, there were 17 who reported experiences of living doubled-up and 28 who reported experiences of literal homelessness.

Lilith is a young Black mother in her early twenties living doubled up with her daughter's grandmother. Resilient and personable, Lilith experienced homelessness and foster care involvement during her time as a student. When we spoke with her, one of her children attended elementary school and was part of a program for students experiencing homelessness. The following are direct quotes from Lilith:

I stayed in a shelter when I was younger with my daddy...That's what started the rebelliousness. Like, 'I don't even want to be here, so I'm going to run away. I don't want to be here so I'm going to go stay with my friend. And just go house to house, have my clothes.' And that's what I did, because I didn't want to be in the shelter.

[Staying in the shelter,] that's how we ended up getting the apartment... He ended up getting low income, and they gave him a nice apartment.

So it's kind of like he just washed his hands with me. Then it took for me to have to live in foster homes, in group homes. Fend for myself, to see, 'Dang, I miss my daddy!' But it was too late...I was in DCFS, and I aged out. [Lilith's father dies]

The fire happened August 4th [2019]. I lost my nephew, and he was like my baby. I was with him every day. [Lilith is shot in the stomach eight months later].

[On living doubled up:] I learned it's not my house, I cannot force nothing, because it's not mine. If I want mine and make my rules, then you have to go get your own.

As with all four case studies, Lilith's story also aligns with issues of trauma, economic opportunity, and family life. Her estrangement from her father, his eventual death, and the fire at her sister's house particularly highlight a dwindling pool of social capital on which she can rely for support. The constancy of crisis in Lilith's life, like Angelina's, drowns out details about school and housing instability. Instead, her experiences of loss are at the forefront of her story and are deeply intertwined with her long history of homelessness and housing instability.

Economic Opportunity Waleed's Story

Ten percent of focus group participants over the age of eighteen reported that they were currently employed. Only one of the 42 participants was employed full-time.

Waleed is a young Black man who is ambitious and resourceful, having worked in some capacity since he was a child. When we spoke with Waleed, he was looking for a job and staying in an emergency overnight shelter.

I didn't have a mom or a dad, like when I was born, neither one of them, they left me in the hospital. So I was going through adoption until the age of seven. So once I got into that foster home I was already grown.

My mom must've knew my foster dad was passing soon because I was the man of the house at like seven. I was doing things outside that I knew kids wasn't supposed to do. And she didn't know. But it's just as long as the money was right.

That's what's wrong with CPS. It's so quick to diagnose you. Because it was funny, they tried to – they put me in special ed through the third and fifth grade and found out that by the sixth grade that I was too smart to be in there.

All I was thinking about was the NBA. So now the NBA gotta hold until I do this, because I know I can go into the NBA at a certain age when I'm successful. Because I know that I can pay my way in.

I'd been in so many different programs, and I received sixteen certifications so far by working in jobs. So right now, the last certification I just received was my food handling and that was just two weeks ago. So that's my sixteenth.

Again, Waleed's experience of housing instability, moving first into group homes and eventually into a foster home, is tied to other experiences. In this case study, Waleed begins to work at the age of seven. Waleed suggests that his foster mother knew he was involved in some work he "wasn't supposed to do" as a child, but never acknowledged it, "as long as the money was right." Notably, Waleed was struggling to find employment despite his desire to move into the formal economy and his portfolio of certifications. At school, Waleed resented having an IEP, feeling that it stigmatized him and limited his school experience.

Family Life Kevin's Story

Twenty percent of participants reported interactions with the foster care system. Other rigorous qualitative research demonstrates a relationship between foster care and youth homelessness, finding nearly half of a sample of young people experiencing homelessness had also spent time in foster care (Dworsky, et al., 2019). Moreover, young people identified entry into foster care as the beginning of their own experience of homelessness (*ibid*). Kevin is a young Black man who spoke at length about the impact of his home life on his ability to succeed academically. Kevin was experiencing literal homelessness at the time of the focus groups. He relayed the following information:

I had to deal with my mom dealing with her addiction to crack. Or like, have to worry about my dad coming in to beat the s* out of my mom because he's drunk and angry... And so, once I got into the system [DCFS], like my focus toward education became more severe. It really didn't start not bothering my school life until I got into the system. You know what I'm saying? Once I got shipped off to DCFS...it definitely affected me.**

I ended up kicking out a car window, one of the teacher's car's windows. Like blacked out, got mad, kicked out a car window...and I ended up flipping a teacher that was trying to stop me on her head and broke her collarbone... yeah it was all bad.

I was always 3.8 or better GPA. Always on high honor roll. So like academics for me was never an issue, it was just my behavior was always an issue, which can in turn affect your grades when you miss days, tardies, stuff that matters.

I was just a young, angry kid with no father, mother got to support three kids in a shelter by herself while working dead end at this CNA job being a nurse. So it was just anger.

Smart and capable, Kevin expressed frustration that his personal circumstances created such obstacles to his academic engagement and draws a clear correlation between his personal life and his difficulty succeeding in school. He notes an association between attendance and GPA, describing his barriers to attending school on-time, regularly, and with the ability to focus.

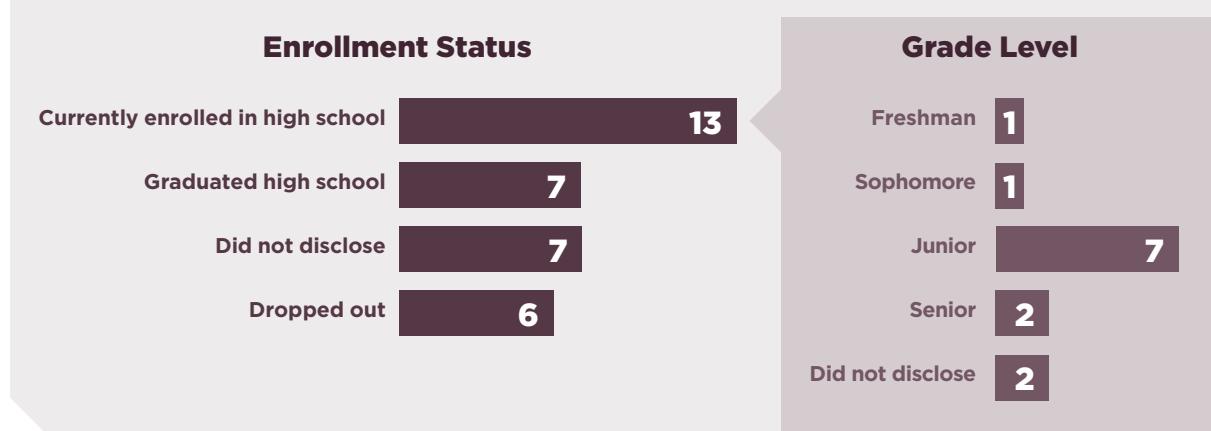
What positive school attributes might counter-balance the challenges that students experiencing homelessness face outside of school?

Angelina, Waleed, Lilith, and Kevin faced numerous challenges and crises in their lives outside of school. Notably, however, all four spoke positively about certain aspects of their in-school experiences, particularly their relationships with staff and peers. Among the 33 focus group participants who were current or recent students (see Figure 12), the most common conversation theme was their positive experiences in school. These students appreciated the sense of stability that school offered, school staff who took a unique interest in their well-being, and the opportunities to meet new people and engage in extra-curriculars. Said one participant, “School really wasn’t too bad. So, I ain’t going to say anything about school. It was mainly home. So school was one of the best.”



KEY FINDING 7: Despite immense barriers, students experiencing homelessness value education and the experience of being in school.

FIGURE 12. School Engagement Among Focus Group Participants



Section 3: In Their Words

Students referenced their positive experiences in school over 60 times across focus groups. These positive school experiences included descriptions of what or who students enjoyed about their schools and were often contrasted by students' descriptions of traumas faced outside of the school context. Almost all 33 participants expressed appreciation for the role that school played in their lives. While 13 participants spoke of being involved in fights at school, eight noted issues with bullying, and two complained about cafeteria food, an overwhelming majority of participants referenced the benefits of being in school, including: socializing with friends, participating in after-school activities, and interacting with teachers who took an interest in their lives. Direct quotes from focus group participants reflecting "positive school attributes" are presented below.

Staff engagement

“[She] was one of my first teachers, and I was like, she just acts so much like my mom...Yeah she calls me every morning...when I first started I was down bad, because when I came to Chicago, I was living with my aunt, but then she had put me out, and I had nowhere to go, so I was with friends. And I was coming to school, and [my teacher] would call me to make sure I’m good and not giving up on myself. She would call me. Then those calls made me motivational so I started coming to school every day. And ever since then, I been good.”

“I always looked forward to the work and the teachers, like some of the cool teachers.... That’s what kept me in school.”

“My teacher bought me shoes, clothes.”

Socio-emotional resources

“I like that you can be open to certain staff you know, if you have a problem you can talk to certain staff, they do respect you, they value your space. When I’m there I feel like I’m at home.”

“She actually became the best teacher I ever had.... Because she became more than a teacher, she actually started to become like my counselor, actually, instead of my teacher....She was more quick to ask me how I was feeling, versus did I finish my work...Like it’s why I even started doing therapy and everything. Like she was kind of basically my first therapist.”

Section 3: In Their Words

“Once I started going to [this school] that’s when I started to actually kind of wing toward the counseling. Because that’s when my anger was getting bad, black outs was consistent... but my counselor, she really helped me out.”

Extra-curricular activities

“I used to like [school] for extracurricular activities. I used to do any and everything that kept me out of the house, because I didn’t like being at home. So, I did pompom, dancing, cheerleader, cooking club, volleyball, track, praise dance, choir.”

Although students' lives outside of school were difficult, many saw school as a place of safety and escape. The high volume of references to positive school attributes demonstrates that students value their education and the enrichment opportunities associated with it. When these findings are viewed alongside the evidence presented in Section 1, it becomes clear that students experiencing homelessness are suffering negative impacts to their academics despite their best efforts and intentions. In one focus group, all participants stated that, if they could speak to their eighth-grade selves, they'd tell them to stay in school.



POLICY INSIGHT

That students explicitly and repeatedly expressed their appreciation for school, despite myriad roadblocks to succeeding academically, lays the groundwork for piloting interventions aimed at supporting homeless students within the school context.

Section 4. Helping Homeless Students Succeed

Seven strategies may help students experiencing homelessness stay engaged in school.

Section 4. Helping Homeless Students Succeed

Students who are homeless often face trauma and crises prior to their spell of housing instability (Goodman et al., 1991; Hyde, 2005). Once doubled-up, living on the street, or staying in shelter, their challenges intensify and multiply. These experiences can destabilize children's academic experience, resulting in absenteeism, behavioral issues, and low graduation rates. While transitional and affordable housing interventions are critical to resolving many of the core issues facing students experiencing homelessness, the current level of investment in these solutions is insufficient to meet the need. What's more, school districts have limited capacity to connect students to housing supports. Teachers, school staff, and administrators need an evidence-based toolkit for supporting students experiencing homelessness within the school context.

Unfortunately, no such toolkit currently exists. Although the body of research on child homelessness is growing, virtually no rigorous studies evaluate school-based strategies for supporting these students. As such, district leaders lack guidance on how best to train their staff, and staff are left with few examples of what positive engagement with students experiencing homelessness might look like. Despite these constraints, some school staff are responding with innovative and potentially impactful strategies to keep homeless students engaged in school. This section describes an analysis of elementary schools and high schools that are closing the gap, which led to interviews with school principals to uncover best practices for supporting students experiencing homelessness.

An analysis of academic data identified 30 public elementary and high schools where students experiencing homelessness were achieving better than expected academic results—that is, where students experiencing homelessness were “beating the odds.” Researchers defined students as “beating the odds” in two ways. First, a school’s homeless students might have a higher GPA or attendance rate than other homeless students across the District. Second, the gap between the attendance rate or GPA of students experiencing homelessness and their stably housed peers within the school might be smaller than the average for Chicago Public Schools. This approach presumes that students experiencing

Section 4. Helping Homeless Students Succeed

homelessness cannot and should not be expected to overcome challenges associated with experiences of housing instability on their own. Rather, external factors including school-level practices are critical supports, and this work takes a data-driven approach to identify such practices.

To that end, staff at 21 of the 30 identified schools participated in interviews aimed at identifying promising approaches to supporting students experiencing homelessness. Principals were thoughtful and detailed in their responses to questions about how they support their students. They spoke of common barriers to student success, including lack of access to basic resources and transportation difficulties. They also described their hopes for their students experiencing homelessness: that they would find stable housing and would someday become happy and successful adults, able to leave these challenges in their past. Across interviews, seven strategies emerged as key to connecting with and supporting students experiencing homelessness.

An analysis of academic data identified 30 public elementary and high schools where students experiencing homelessness were achieving better than expected academic results—that is, where students experiencing homelessness were “beating the odds.”

What school-level practices are being deployed at schools where homeless students are succeeding academically?



KEY FINDING 8: Seven strategies may help students experiencing homelessness stay engaged in school.

Strategies for Helping Homeless Students Succeed



Destigmatize homelessness status



“Know kids’ stories”



Closely and consistently monitor students



“Sweat the small stuff”: meet basic needs



Connect students and parents to opportunities to earn income



Make the school a “lighthouse to the community”



Identify the right point person

Section 4. Helping Homeless Students Succeed

Destigmatize homelessness status

 One of the first statements that many principals made was that all students should be treated the same. **No student should have to “feel the tag” of homelessness** or experience shame as a result of their living situation. In practice, this meant that the school must above and beyond to fill any gaps in resources between unstably housed students and their stably housed peers (see #4: “Sweat the small stuff”: meet basic needs below). Principals also emphasized the importance of being discrete about providing supports, such as by:

- Designating a private space for the homelessness liaison to meet with students (an opposing approach with the same intent is to hide these activities in plain sight, such as by locating the liaison in the front office where all students go for one reason or another)
- Having a closet with donated clothing and other goods from the community that students could access (with permission) to select needed items without adult supervision
- Advertising a meeting for homeless students as a “pizza party with the principal” so it is not obvious that the meeting is targeted specifically to these students



“Know kids’ stories”

Principals emphasized the importance of really “knowing kids’ stories” when serving students experiencing homelessness because each child’s needs vary so greatly depending on their unique circumstances. One principal commented, **“We used to know the number and percentage of students struggling with attendance, now we know names and stories.”** To learn these stories, principals spoke to systematic ways for each student to develop a trusting, one-on-one mentoring relationship with at least one adult in the building – whether it was the security guard, the lunch lady, their favorite teacher, or the homelessness liaison. Students were typically asked to choose their “adult advocate” or vice versa rather than assigning them, as it is important for there to be a genuine affinity and authentic connection at the core. These relationships were formalized as part of a school-wide system, which typically looks like a version of one of the following:

- Each adult in the building has their own “list” of kids who they look after (in one school, both the students and their parents had the mentor’s phone number so they could reach out to them at any time for any reason)
- Students formally name one or two adults in the building who look after them and they feel comfortable reaching out to for any reason



Closely and consistently monitor students

Principals had both **formal and informal systems in place to keep constant tabs on students' academics and personal circumstances**. Schools typically leveraged common interactions with students, such as the weekly distribution of bus passes, to build trust through quick check ins and inquiries into how a student is doing overall. In one school, a full-time "student advocate," an alumna of the school who has a strong rapport with students, stood at the front door every morning, in the lunchroom, and in hallways between classes to do "pulse checks" with students.

When discussing the importance of regular check ins and ensuring "multiple positive points of contact with an adult every day," one principal explained, "**We are these students' everything, and we're home, because we are the only thing that is consistent and reliable in their lives.**" Therefore, it is incumbent on the staff to know what is going on and be responsive to their needs. This consistency is what will keep students coming back when everything else in their lives is in flux. To that effect, principals spoke not only to having systems to monitor students, but the importance of responding to their needs immediately. Among other examples, principals mentioned:

- A "Knock at Night" program, which sent school staff to go to the homes of any student who has been absent for three or more days
- Sponsored "lunch bunches" for students to check in with their mentor teacher over a hot lunch provided by the school at the first sign of academic distress
- Coordinated Behavioral Health Team meetings that connected the dots between student data and student behavior



"Sweat the small stuff": meet basic needs

Schools where homeless students were beating the odds were intentional about providing students with the resources they need to fully participate in school, starting with the basics like toiletries, extra uniforms, school supplies, and/or free clothing. However, most went above and beyond these necessities.

Several schools had washing machines installed onsite, and/or provided students with laundry detergent (as some families may not be able to afford it). Principals noted that dirty clothes are sometimes the reason students choose to stay home from school.

- One school provided monthly packets of basic necessities, but more importantly, used this exchange as an opportunity to ask students what else they need (e.g. gym shoes, laptop computer, etc.). The school went to any length necessary – outreach to service agencies, donations, or fundraising among alumni – to get students everything they needed.

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- One school provided food to students on Saturdays if they are food insecure at home.
- Several schools had “incentive” programs based on academics and behavior that help students access fun activities (like movies or a trip to Six Flags) or perks like prom photos.



Connect students and parents to opportunities to earn income

Seven of the nine high school principals interviewed led career or vocational high schools, a disproportionately high percentage of schools compared to the 40 percent of high schools across the city with this distinction. Perhaps intuitively, principals spoke to the positive effects of connecting students to sources of income, both as a motivator to continue in school and as an opportunity for them to contribute to their family's finances.

- In one school, a partnership with local community colleges enabled students to receive a forklift certification as early as their sophomore year that offers them the opportunity to earn 20 dollars and hour as part of a paid job.
- Another principal provided special invitations to these types of paid internship opportunities to students experiencing homelessness to ensure they received priority access.

When elementary school principals were asked to name barriers to their students' academic engagement, many spoke about **connecting homeless parents with economic opportunities**. Said one principal, “We need partnerships with jobs and work resources for adults. **No child can be a happy child while their parent is not in a good place.**”



Make the school a “lighthouse to the community”

Principals emphasized that school should be a “one-stop-shop” for students’ needs. Many schools where students experiencing homelessness were beating the odds had external partnerships with community-based organizations to help meet students’ needs holistically. They brought organizations into the school in full-time capacities or on a semi-regular cadence for them to build rapport with students.

- Several schools had **in-school partnerships** with programs like youth engagement and mental health programs to help students manage socio-behavioral issues and the trauma associated with homelessness
- Some principals had health or counseling clinics onsite, or invited health care, mental health, or substance use **organizations into the school on a regular cadence** to build rapport with the students, hoping to get the students (and, eventually, their families) to engage in their services outside of school
- Some schools had explicit **partnerships with nearby shelters** or organizations that can make housing referrals to families.

Section 4. Helping Homeless Students Succeed



Identify the right point person

Principals were intentional about finding the right liaison, trying a few different people before finding someone who could connect and build foundational trust with students. Time and again, principals highlighted the importance of identifying and appointing an engaged, sensitive staff member to act as the school's student homelessness point person, or 'liaison.' One principal brought the student homelessness liaison to the interview to further emphasize this point. The liaison said, **"it's a selfless job, and it's definitely not for everyone...but I'm the right person to do this."** Principals sought out the following characteristics in their student homelessness point people:

- An understanding of the importance of respecting students' and families' privacy and employing extreme discretion when interacting with them, which is critical for building long-lasting rapports with families
- Having community connections beyond the school, which furthered student trust in staff point people. Many point people were alumni of the school where they now worked, had worked at the school for many years, or had strong community ties.
- Said one principal, **"it really depends on your personality. It really kind of does.** Your relationships with students and parents are the biggest part of it."

By collecting and disseminating insights like these strategies, the Inclusive Economy Lab hopes to shine a spotlight on practices that are already in place in many schools and that, if scaled, may lead to sizeable positive impacts for students. The Inclusive Economy Lab identified these strategies in partnership with CPS. Partners at CPS reviewed the findings and very quickly sensed their relevance and applicability. The strategies have since been incorporated into annual trainings for both principals and student homelessness liaisons. The Inclusive Economy Lab and CPS are collaborating in the 2020 – 2021 school year to evaluate the impact of hiring full-time dedicated staff members focused on supporting students experiencing homelessness. These staff members will receive intensive coaching in the implementation of these strategies and will routinely collect and report back on interventions they employ to prioritize and support their homeless students.

Discussion

Student homelessness
is not a monolithic
experience.

Homelessness is a more common experience among CPS students than previously recognized. Students who are enrolled in CPS for at least four years have a greater than one in 10 chance of experiencing homelessness. Students who experience homelessness are overwhelmingly Black, living doubled-up, and at-risk for decreased GPA, attendance, and high school graduation due to their living situation. However, student homelessness is not a monolithic experience. While the initial experience of homelessness does adversely affect both grades and attendance, a large share of students who experience homelessness are struggling academically well before enrolling in the STLS program. Length and type of housing instability vary across student groups as well, with a plurality of both younger and older students living doubled-up for one to two years before stabilizing again. By parsing out these differences, the Inclusive Economy Lab hopes to provide policymakers with the information necessary to design tailored interventions to help students.

Homeless students and caregivers shared details of their personal lives with researchers. Often, stories were characterized by uncertainty, violence, and resilience. Most students also spoke positively about school as a source of stability and connection. Principals interviewed for this report understood the particular value that school holds for these students and recommended “knowing kids’ stories.” Principals offered other suggestions that could be scaled to support homeless students including partnering with community service providers and connecting students and parents to economic opportunity. Presented alongside the quantitative evidence, these findings suggest that students experiencing homelessness would benefit from an array of cross-sectoral policy interventions, some of which are already being piloted in schools and communities in Chicago and across the country.

This research has also highlighted profound racial inequities. Black students in CPS have a one in four chance of experiencing homelessness. That disparities among homeless students in CPS mirror those in the CoC suggests this is not an issue of over- or under-identification. Rather, federal and local policy have created and sustained disparities in income and wealth that leave Black households particularly economically vulnerable. Nearly half of Black children in Chicago experience poverty, compared to approximately 24 percent of Hispanic children and less than 10 percent of white children. Sixty-three percent of Black renters in Chicago are rent-burdened, leaving them at-risk of eviction and housing instability (City Tech Collaborative, 2019; Novara, 2020). Landlord practices also play an important role, limiting housing options for families that have previously experienced evictions, or whose members have past involvement with the criminal legal system. These structural factors combine to create a level of housing instability for Black Chicagoans that far exceeds that experienced by other communities.

CPS is deeply committed to addressing these historic inequities and improving outcomes for students experiencing housing instability. The District is already piloting a number of innovative approaches to supporting students experiencing homelessness. During the 2020-21 school year, 20 **STLS Advocates** provided intensive school-based supports using the seven strategies described in Section 4. The District is partnering with the Inclusive Economy Lab to track preliminary outcomes from this effort.

CPS is deeply committed to addressing these historic inequities and improving outcomes for students experiencing housing instability.

In 2021, Facing Forward and CPS partnered to launch a pilot of **housing-focused case management** services targeted at homeless students. The Inclusive Economy Lab will evaluate the impact of these wraparound services on homeless students' academic outcomes. Finally, in 2017 and 2018, the City's **Families in Transition (FIT)** program provided 100 permanent supportive housing units to CPS families based on measures of family vulnerability rather than traditional HUD

housing eligibility criteria, making it one of the first programs in the nation to offer permanent housing to families living doubled up in addition to those experiencing literal homelessness. While the results of this project are still being assessed, FIT has uncovered preliminary evidence suggesting that doubled up and literally homeless families face similar challenges to stability, like prior experiences with incarceration and childhood trauma.

Discussion

Building on these efforts, the District and other stakeholders could consider piloting additional promising practices to address some of the key findings from this report:

- Most homeless students are living doubled-up. Individuals living doubled-up are not currently eligible for federally funded services like permanent supportive housing. A plurality of homeless students live doubled-up for only one to two years before stabilizing again, suggesting that short-term interventions might be sufficient to help this population. Unrestricted emergency financial assistance, like that provided by the **Family Independence Initiative**, could help doubled-up families regain stability sooner, leading to better academic outcomes for children.
- Many students experience GPA and attendance declines upon first experiencing homelessness. Early intervention programs like those piloted at **FamilyAid Boston** and the **Sprout Initiative** at Your Way Home aim to identify students at risk of homelessness within the school context. By identifying students prior to experiencing homelessness, schools may be able to help students avoid negative academic outcomes altogether.
- Homeless students are less likely than stably housed peers to graduate high school. High schoolers experiencing homelessness could be targeted to receive additional supports to ensure they graduate high school and make a successful transition to postsecondary opportunities, such as those offered by **One Million Degrees** (Bertrand, et al., 2019).
- Impacts on attendance are substantial for high school students and unaccompanied elementary school students. An attendance intervention that prioritizes high school students and unaccompanied students in elementary school could be piloted and tested with this population.
- Literally homeless high school students experience the largest negative impacts to their GPA in the first year of experiencing homelessness, and those impacts are not driven by absences. The qualitative research presented in this report suggests that traumatic experiences outside of school may be negatively impacting students' academic outcomes. Groups like **Chicago HOPES**, which provides educational support for children living in shelter, might prioritize this group of students for additional tutoring resources in conjunction with socio-emotional supports.

The Inclusive Economy Lab hopes this report offers tools to improve existing services and inspires new approaches to holistically supporting homeless students and their families. While the findings presented here provide foundational insight into

the experiences of homeless students in CPS, the next phase of this research will seek to rigorously evaluate programs designed to support students experiencing homelessness. Working in partnership with the District and other key stakeholders, the Inclusive Economy Lab seeks to grow the evidence base of what works, with the goal of scaling

“I want my [homeless] kids to feel known, valued, and inspired: just like all kids.”

effective approaches that help homeless students succeed, however that may be defined – be it through housing stability, academic success, or employment outcomes. As one principal said, “I want my [homeless] kids to feel known, valued, and inspired: just like all kids.”

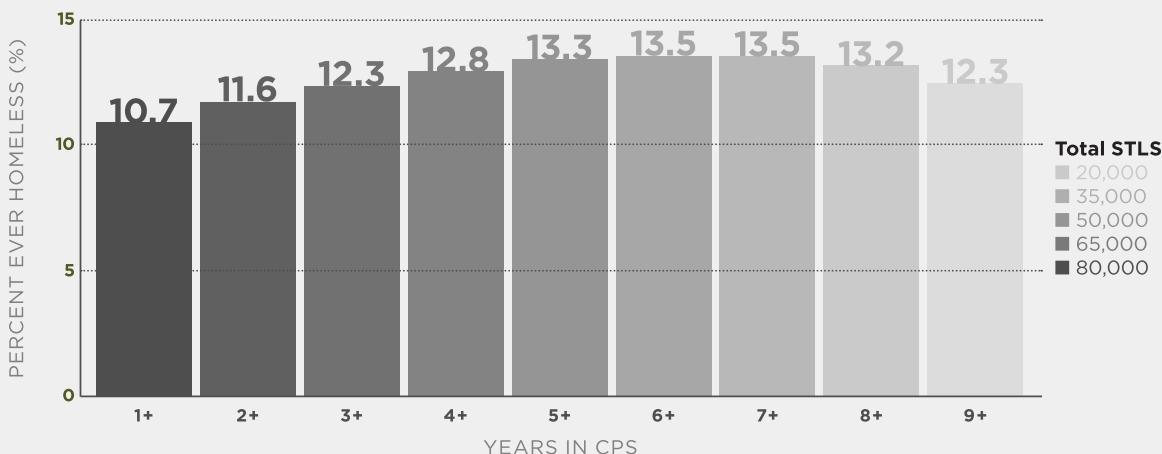
Appendices

Appendix A. Detailed Methodology: Student Years of Homelessness

The data depicted in Figure A1 represents the percentage of all public-school students who have experienced homelessness at least once in their academic career, grouped by the number of years of data available for those students. To identify the likelihood of experiencing homelessness by number of years enrolled in public school, the Inclusive Economy Lab first created a binary metric to measure whether a student has ever been identified as homeless in the available data from SY 2009-10 to SY 2017-18. A separate categorical metric is then created representing how many years of data is available for each student using their student IDs (which can be interpreted as the number of years they have been enrolled in public school). All student data are then grouped by the number of years of available records (i.e., years in public school), and these groups are analyzed to identify the percentage of students in each group who have experienced homelessness at least once in this time. The finding that roughly 13 percent of students with at least four years in public school experience homelessness at some point in their career can also be interpreted as: roughly 13 percent of students with four years of public school data have experienced homelessness at some point between fall 2009 and spring 2018.

This interpretation reflects the caveat that these methods implicitly exclude any students who, at the time data collection began (SY 2009-10), were about to age out of CPS or who, at the time data collection ended (SY 2017-18), were too young to display more years of data. For example, a student who may have completed four years of high school with CPS, but graduated in Spring 2011, would be represented as having only two years in school.

FIGURE A1. Measuring Prevalence of Student Homelessness by Years in School



Appendix B. Detailed Methodology: Racial Equity Analysis

The racial equity analysis is based on summary statistics of all students who were enrolled at CPS between Fall 2009 and Spring 2018. The Inclusive Economy Lab first checked what self-identified demographic attribute was listed for each student, then created agglomerate groups based on whether students self-identified as Hispanic. Other race categories were parsed following this initial agglomeration. This data was then grouped by school year and represented in Figure 1. Race/ethnicity of all homeless students compared to all students. The same methodology was applied to create Figure 3. Living Situations of Homeless Students by Race/Ethnicity, but the data were grouped by living situation instead of school year. While students could also self-identify as Pacific Islander, Native American, or multi-race, these identifications were not included in our final outputs. Once aggregated into an “Other” category, these racial/ethnic identifications accounted for only 1.6 percent of all public-school students.

Appendix C. Detailed Methodology: Propensity Score Matching

The overview below outlines key decisions that the Inclusive Economy Lab made when developing a rigorous methodological approach to attempt to isolate the impact of the first year of homeless status on academic outcomes.

Student population

In order to examine the impact of the first year of a student’s homeless status on their academic outcomes, the Inclusive Economy Lab limited the analysis to the following population of students:

1. Students who attended CPS in both SY 2016-17 and SY 2017-18
2. Had no history of STLS status prior to SY 2017-18, meaning that if they were identified as homeless in SY 2017-18, it was their first time¹⁸ being identified as homeless¹⁹

¹⁸ The Inclusive Economy Lab has access to student homelessness data going back to SY 2009-10. It is possible that some of the older students may have been identified as STLS prior to SY 2009-10 and that would not be reflected in this analysis. However, our assumption is that the number of students to whom this situation would apply is low.

¹⁹ Because a student must attend the district two years in a row in order to be included in this analysis, which requires a certain degree of residential stability, and cannot have been identified as homeless in SY 2016-17, the students who are excluded from this analysis have higher rates of being identified as homeless, lower attendance rates, and higher mobility rates.

Because this analysis examines GPA as an outcome measure, the Inclusive Economy Lab limited the analysis to District schools, which have significantly lower rates of missing GPA in SY 2017-18 and in SY 2016-17 than the full portfolio of CPS schools (including charter, contract, and options schools). An additional consideration that informed the choice to limit the analysis to District schools is the fact that CPS has more authority to offer or suggest targeted academic supports to District schools than independently-run schools, which have the autonomy to determine the academic supports they offer to students. Students were excluded from the analysis if they did not meet specifications #1 and #2 cited above, leaving 62,487 high school students and 147,311 elementary school students in District schools remaining in the analysis. Additional demographics about these student populations can be found in the table at the end of Appendix E.

Controlling for background characteristics

Students who are identified as homeless in any school year have different background characteristics than their non-homeless peers and higher rates of mobility. As a result, a straightforward comparison of the academic performance of homeless students to all non-homeless students would fail to isolate the impact of housing stability – as opposed to the impact of a variety of background characteristics – on academic outcomes.

To control for these differences, the Inclusive Economy Lab calculated a score for each CPS student in the population described above that predicts their likelihood of being identified as homeless in SY 2017-18 based on a demographic, background, academic, and attendance characteristics²⁰ from SY 2016-17; in other words, they were assigned a “propensity score” for their likelihood of being identified as homeless in SY 2017-18. To account for students who had missing data, the Inclusive Economy Lab conducted a multiple imputation by chained equations (MICE) for specific subpopulations (such as high school district students). This method can impute predictions for missing data to conserve as many observations of students as possible. The means of the MICE imputation weight estimates were then converted to stabilized weights, which enabled the Inclusive Economy Lab to conduct balance checks and calculate the average treatment effect estimate.

If the covariates of the two groups of homeless and non-homeless students were not sufficiently balanced after the propensity score weighting was conducted, then an additional model including covariates such as gender was run to adjust for these imbalances. This adjustment aims to reduce bias in the predictor of the estimated treatment effect. The final balances for district elementary school students’ characteristics are presented in Table A1. The final balances for district high school students’ characteristics are presented in Table A2.

²⁰ Propensity for being identified as homeless in SY 2017-18 model predictors include: gender, race, IEP status, ESL, age, school type, number of schools attended, attendance, and GPA in SY 2016-17.

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In this analysis, homeless students' outcomes were compared with those of other students who had the same propensity for being identified as homeless in SY 2017-18 but were not actually homeless. By using an inverse propensity score weighting method, homeless students who do not have an exact propensity score match among non-homeless students could be compared to a combination of homeless students who, when combined into a single student, more closely match the original student than would any student individually. This methodological approach is intended to help ensure that academic outcomes are only compared between students who looked as similar as possible to them, except for the fact that they were identified as homeless, and the other students were not.

An important limitation of the propensity score matching approach is that it only controls for differences between homeless and non-homeless students that are represented in the data. Other differences between the two groups, such as family stability, which is not recorded in CPS data, could still bias these estimates.

Table A1. 2017 Balance Table: Elementary School Students (District Only), Stabilized Weights

Baseline Covariate (2017)	Non-Homeless Student N	Non-Homeless Student Mean (SD)	Homeless Student N	Homeless Student Mean (SD)
IEP Status	19,891.1	13.5	142.3	14.3
ESL	33,974.8	23.0	194.3	19.5
Female	72,873.7	49.4	490.9	49.3
Age at Start of SY	-	8.84 (2.15)	-	8.96 (2.18)
Enrolled (%)	-	0.99 (0.06)	-	0.99 (0.08)
Avg. % Days Attended (%)	-	0.95 (0.05)	-	0.95 (0.05)
GPA	-	3.28 (0.62)	-	3.19 (0.60)
School Count	-	1.03 (0.19)	-	1.06 (0.24)
Asian	6,826.4	4.6	8.0	0.8
Black	42,460.3	28.8	352.8	35.4
Hispanic	77,114.8	52.3	568.4	57.1
White	18,531.8	12.6	45.7	4.6

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Table A2. 2017 Balance Table: High School Students (District Only), Stabilized Weights

Baseline Covariate (2017)	Non-Homeless Student N	Non-Homeless Student Mean (SD)	Homeless Student N	Homeless Student Mean (SD)
IEP Status	8,732.2	14.2	106.1	12.5
ESL	5,185.5	8.4	79.0	9.3
Female	31,137.6	50.7	424.4	50.1
Age at Start of SY	-	14.64 (1.23)	-	14.80 (1.23)
Enrolled (%)	-	0.99 (0.06)	-	0.99 (0.05)
Avg. % Days Attended (%)	-	0.93 (0.08)	-	0.93 (0.08)
GPA	-	2.91 (0.83)	-	2.97 (0.84)
School Count	-	1.02 (0.16)	-	1.02 (0.15)
Asian	3,459.4	5.6	68.0	8.0
Black	16,670.0	27.1	236.8	28.0
Hispanic	32,539.5	52.9	472.6	55.8
White	7,594.7	12.4	57.6	6.8

Appendix D. Detailed Methodology: Longitudinal and Outcomes Cluster Analyses

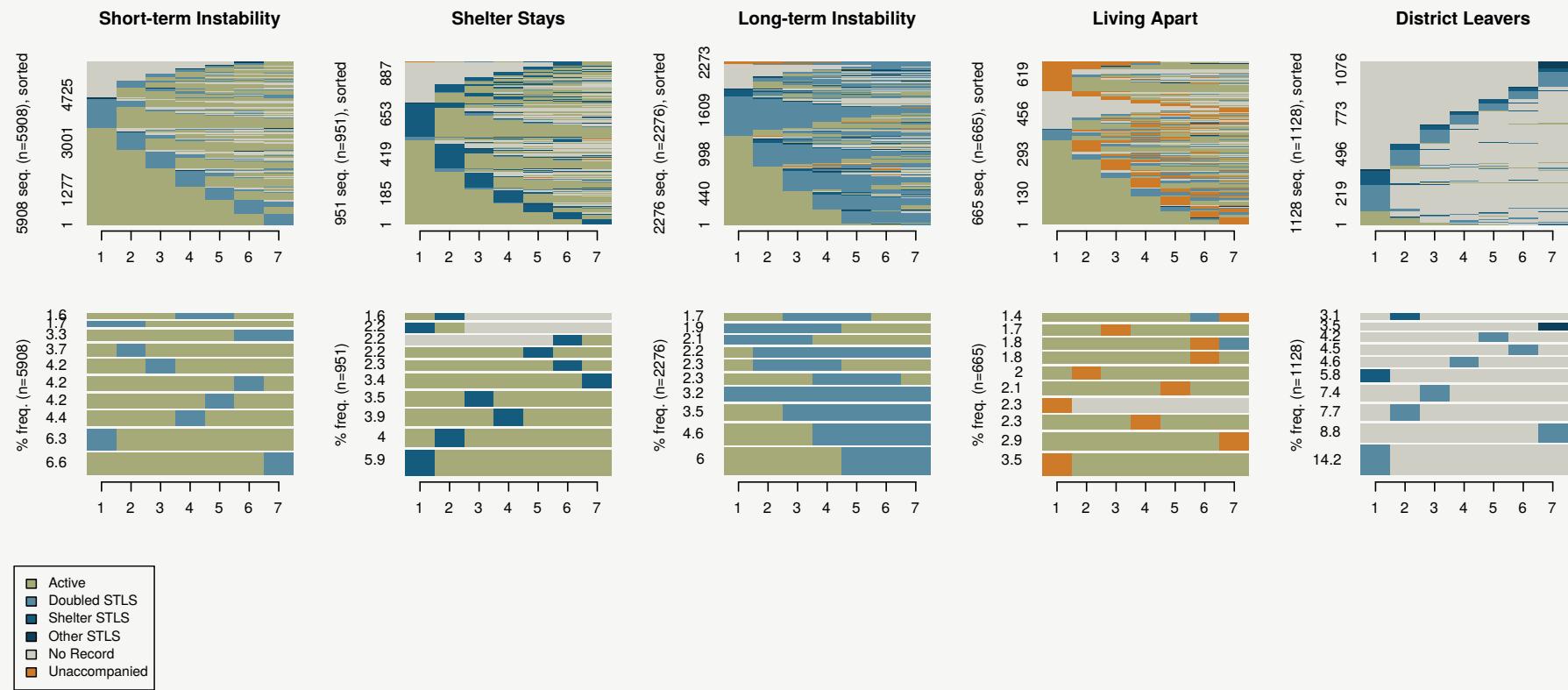
The Inclusive Economy Lab employed an agglomerative hierarchical cluster analysis design to better understand the most common housing trajectories of students in temporary living situations, as well as the impacts of their living situation on their academic and behavioral trajectories. CPS collects several annualized variables for students enrolled in the student homelessness program, including unaccompanied status (i.e., are students living with their family or not), number of school transitions, and family housing type (e.g., doubled up, shelter, unsheltered, etc.). The longitudinal availability of these data across the sample allow for analysis of year-to-year variation.

Clustering methods are a powerful tool in exploratory analysis towards mechanically identifying sample heterogeneity (as opposed to manual selection on covariates). Hierarchical models are of particular use towards applied policy interventions because they provide several potential cluster groupings without biasing results through initial k-means cluster selection. The model used in this report implements Ward's algorithm method, meaning that the process may be fully replicated regardless of initial random seed. An ensemble of other clustering methods, including constructing a gap statistic, elbow test, and silhouette test, was used to test robustness of eventual clusters.

Since this algorithm is distance-based, the researchers engineered several features intended to capture any and all aspects of chronicity, including the timing of first enrollment in the STLS program, the number of transitions between different housing experiences, a count of total years experiencing each type of housing instability (i.e. living doubled up or experiencing literal homelessness), and a measure of uninterrupted chronicity to identify **longitudinal clusters**. Once all potentially meaningful features were used for cluster creation, the model was pruned to leave only the most impactful metrics. This process resulted in ten clusters based on students' longitudinal experience with housing instability. At this point, researchers incorporated academic and behavioral outcomes as well as student-level demographic data to understand how these outcomes are associated with different academic trajectories. These clusters are depicted in more detail in Figures A2 and A3.

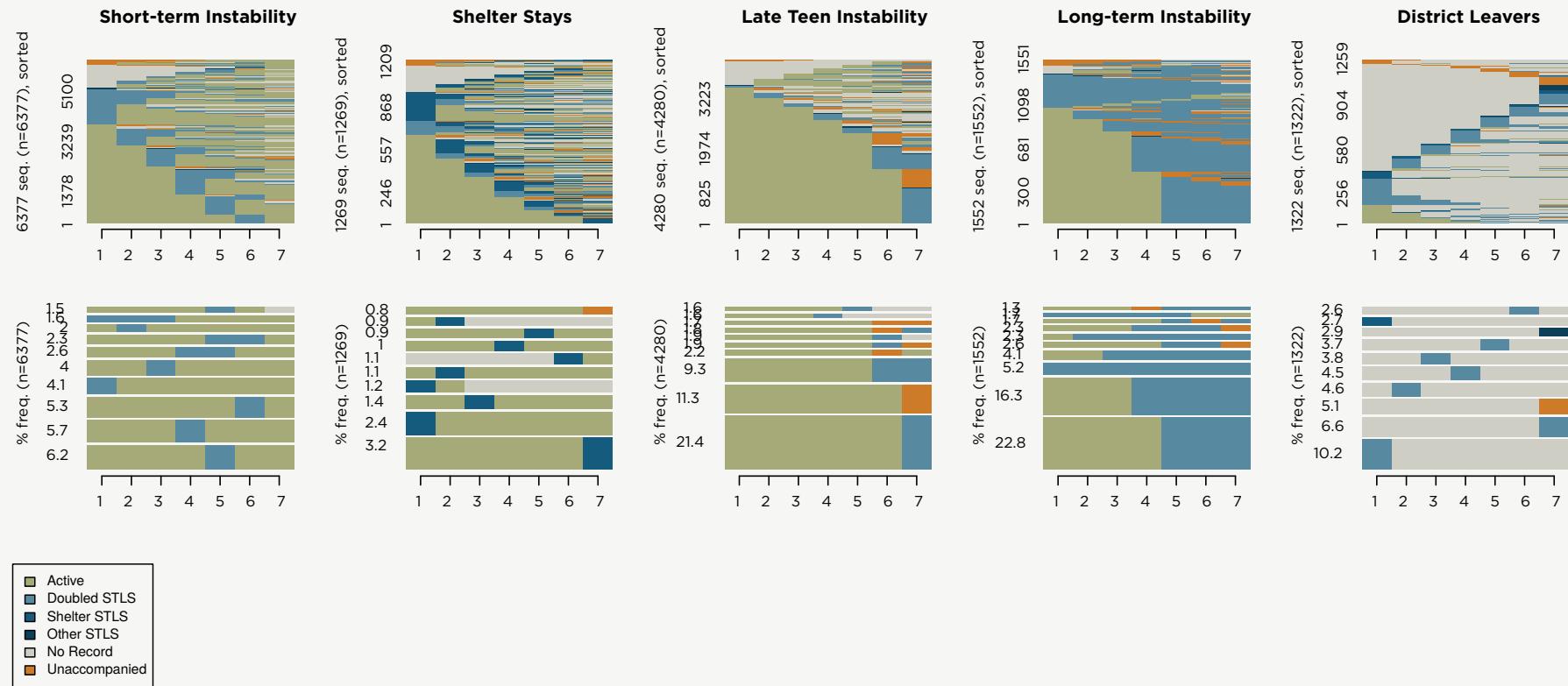
Appendices

FIGURE A2. Five main longitudinal clusters for grades K-6



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FIGURE A3. Five main longitudinal clusters for grades 6-12



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Additionally, a similar clustering technique was employed on **academic and behavioral outcome data** in the reverse process to assess if heterogeneous groupings coincide between longitudinal and academic indicators. This analysis was identical to that used to determine longitudinal clusters apart from the input variables. Rather than engineering variables to capture chronicity, researchers used simplistic measures using base attributes (i.e., attendance and GPA) to direct the formation of these clusters, resulting in two sets of seven clusters, one set for attendance and another for GPA (Tables A3 and A4). These clusters are divided to identify trends and averages in either attendance or GPA as follows:

1. The year prior to first being identified as homeless
2. The first year a student is identified as homeless
3. The average attendance/GPA of the year a student is identified as homeless and the year following
4. The average attendance/GPA of the two years prior to when a student is identified as homeless
5. The observed trend in the year prior to being identified as homeless
6. The difference between the average attendance/GPA in the first year a student is identified as homeless and the year prior
7. The difference between the average attendance/GPA in the first year prior to when a student is identified as homeless and the year after Appendix E.

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TABLE A3. Attendance rate averages and trends, by grade cohort

Cluster Number	K-6th Grade Cohort			6th-12th Grade Cohort		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
n	1,153	614	778	3,350	1,178	920
% of total	45.3%	24.1%	30.6%	62.9%	20.9%	16.2%
Attendance rate, %ile rank						
Trend prior to homelessness	-4.0%	1.7%	1.2%	-8.9%	0.6%	14.1%
Attendance, year prior to homelessness	13.8%	51.5%	50.2%	20.3%	49.8%	68.6%
Attendance, first year identified homeless	14.7%	22.2%	64.5%	17.9%	66.2%	32.0%
Difference between year prior and first year attendance rate	0.9%	-29.4%	-14.3%	-2.4%	16.4%	-36.5%
Average attendance rate pre-homelessness	17.0%	49.3%	48.6%	28.2%	49.0%	59.2%
Average attendance rate post-homelessness	20.4%	25.8%	60.1%	17.7%	60.8%	30.7%
Difference in averages	3.4%	-23.5%	12.5%	-10.5%	11.8%	-28.5%

Note: Attendance rate is measured as percentage of days attended of total days enrolled. Highlighted cells indicate key trends which may differentiate one cluster from others. For trend and difference data, negative values indicate a decrease in attendance rates, whereas positive values indicate an improvement.

TABLE A4. GPA percentile rank averages and trends, by grade cohort

Cluster Number	K-6th Grade Cohort			6th-12th Grade Cohort		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
n	1,123	664	759	2,309	2,312	1,027
% of total	44.1%	26.1%	29.8%	40.9%	40.9%	18.2%
Adjusted GPA, %ile rank						
Trend prior to homelessness	-5.0%	-6.1%	12.1%	-8.9%	9.4%	-5.9%
GPA %ile rank, year prior to homelessness	16.5%	20.1%	64.8%	14.9%	56.8%	25.9%
GPA %ile rank, first year identified homeless	12.3%	41.5%	49.8%	15.8%	42.2%	59.3%
Difference between year prior and first year %ile rank	-4.1%	21.4%	-15.0%	1.0%	-14.6%	33.4%
Average %ile rank pre-homelessness	20.6%	24.3%	56.5%	21.8%	50.7%	31.1%
Average %ile rank post-homelessness	13.5%	41.2%	48.3%	17.7%	40.7%	53.9%
Difference in averages	-7.0%	16.9%	-8.3%	-4.1%	-10.1%	22.5%

Note: Percentile rank compares students identified as homeless to all students of similar stages in public school. Highlighted cells indicate key trends which may differentiate one cluster from others. For trend and difference data, negative values indicate a decrease in percentile rank, whereas positive values indicate an improvement.

Appendix E.

Focus Group Methodology

I. Description of study sample and recruitment methodology.

The Inclusive Economy Lab partnered with CPS to conduct seven focus groups with current and recent students and parents/guardians who were experiencing homelessness. This research was conducted with the goal of learning more about the barriers that homeless students and families face to staying engaged in school and what supports they think might help.

Youth and parents were purposively selected to participate in focus groups to ensure that groups represented the district's homeless student population in terms of age and demographics, as well as type of housing instability they are experiencing (i.e. literally homeless, living in a shelter, or living doubled up) and whether they are living with their families or are unaccompanied. In addition to including these student perspectives, the Inclusive Economy Lab conducted three focus groups with the parents of younger homeless students to understand the impact of homelessness on their children and their family unit. Parents were selected for focus groups with the intention that they are representative of the overall homeless student population. School liaisons and partners at CPS were critical to recruitment efforts.

Because of the sensitive topics included in the focus group discussions, participants provided all information on a completely voluntary basis. As a result, some background information about participants, like their housing status during their academic career or grade level, was not explicitly stated in the transcripts.

II. Focus group protocol

The research team worked closely with staff to ensure that participation in the focus groups was not stigmatizing for students or parents and provided an opportunity for them to share their experiences in an empowering way. Participants received a small financial incentive for attending the focus groups, compensation for travel, and food during the group.

Over the course of three months in the spring and summer of 2019, 42 individuals participated in one of seven focus groups. Each focus group lasted 90 minutes. The Inclusive Economy Lab audio recorded, transcribed, and qualitative coded (using NVivo software) each focus group to identify key themes. On average, five people participated in each focus group. Participants included minors who were living unaccompanied, minors who were living doubled up or experiencing literal homelessness with their families, and parents or guardians who were living

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doubled up or experiencing literal homelessness. Facilitators posed questions seeking to learn more about participants' aspirations, past and current social service utilization (both within and outside of school) and attitudes toward school. Facilitators conducted the groups using a semi-structured protocol, designed to better understand the challenges homeless students and their families face as well as what support might be useful in navigating those challenges.

Two members of the research team attended each group, with one researcher serving as the primary moderator for the group and the other serving as a note taker. Researchers employed an inductive and deductive approach to coding the focus group transcripts and notes in order to identify major themes in the participant responses. The deductive codes were developed based on the existing literature on the challenges homeless students face in engaging in school. While the deductive codes provided a common framework for starting the analysis, the coding structure was also updated to best reflect the perspectives voiced in the focus groups. This inductive approach to coding helped to ensure that the research team did not miss unexpected insights. The codebook with number of references by age group is included in Table A6 below.

III. Codes and full protocol listed

TABLE A5. Codes and Definitions Used in Qualitative Analysis

Youth Code-Name	Youth Code Description
Academic Achievement	Broad mention of academic achievement, grades, GPA, test scores, retention
Aspirations	Young people's descriptions of their occupational or personal aspirations for the future
Building Skills	Reference to skills or coursework students would like to access in their schools
Employment	Young people's mentions of employment, whether past, current employment, or the type of jobs they want in the future
Institutional Attention (and Neglect)	Descriptions of young people's encounters and interactions with the school system at large or social service institutions
Mobility	Descriptions or explanations of students moving—may include student moving residences or changing schools, school tardiness/truancy
Negative School Attributes	Descriptions of what/who students dislike about their school (s). May include coursework, policies, or staff
Positive School Attributes	Descriptions of what/who students like or enjoy about their school(s). May include coursework, policies, or staff

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Youth Code-Name	Youth Code Description
Resources- Access	Explicit mention of what, who, or how students access STLS services/ resources
Resources- Barriers	Explicit mention of the barriers to resources or services provided by STLS
Trauma	Explicit mention of a distressing event and/ or specific reference to emotions or behaviors caused by that event. Also code for all discussions of MENTAL HEALTH here (reference to suicide, depression, therapy or diagnoses)
Youth-identified Needs	Young peoples' descriptions of what resources they need to be engaged or successful in school
Youth Voice and Perspectives	General mention of youth empowerment or agency—can be facilitated by school personnel, family, or outside agencies (i.e. caseworkers)
Parent Code-Name	Parent Code Description
P - G Aspirations	Descriptions of the occupational/ personal aspirations participants have for their children
P - G Employment	Mentions of employment, whether past, current, or future
P - G Resources - Access	Explicit mention of what, who, or how participants access services/ resources
P - G Resources - Barriers	Explicit mention of the barriers to resources or services provided by STLS and other social service programs
P - G Positive School Attributes	Descriptions of what parents/guardians like about their children's schools
P - G Negative School Attributes	Descriptions of what parents/guardians dislike about their children's schools
P - G Opportunity	Explicit mention of the opportunities guardians want for their children
P - G Trauma	Explicit mention of a distressing event and/ or specific reference to emotions or behaviors caused by that event. Also code for all discussions of MENTAL HEALTH here (reference to suicide, depression, therapy or diagnoses)
P - G Voice and Perspectives	General mention of parent/guardian opinion, agency and empowerment, particularly when making decision for their children. Can be facilitated by school personnel or outside agencies (i.e. caseworkers)
P - G Mobility	Descriptions or explanations of any type of moving by the parents or the students—may include moving residences or changing schools, school tardiness/truancy

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TABLE A6. Number of References by Code for Student and Parent Focus Groups

Student Code	Number of references
Positive School Attributes	60
Aspirations	46
Trauma	38
Negative School Attributes	36
Voice and Perspectives	21
Employment	20
Resources – Access	18
Resources – Barriers	18
Academic Achievement	17
Youth-identified Needs	13
Mobility	11
Building Skills	9
Institutional Attention	9
Parent Code	Number of references
Resources – Barriers	24
Voice and Perspectives	23
Aspirations	21
Resources – Access	18
Negative School Attributes	12
Employment	10
Trauma	9
Positive School Attributes	7
Mobility	6
Opportunity	5

Appendix F. Methodology: Strategies to Help Homeless Students Succeed

I. Background analysis

In partnership with CPS, the Inclusive Economy Lab sought to identify elementary and high schools that may be helping students “Beat the Odds,” with the goal of interviewing principals and staff at those schools to learn about potential best practices. To identify these schools, the Inclusive Economy Lab modeled school performance on two outcomes: GPA and attendance. The first analysis identified schools where students experiencing homelessness achieved better outcomes than similar homeless students across the district. The second identified schools that reduced the achievement gap between homeless and stably housed students. We used available outcome data from the 2017-18 school year to identify elementary and high schools where the performance of homeless students differed from the district average to a degree that is statistically significant.

II. Interview recruitment and methodology

These analyses identified thirty elementary and high schools where students experiencing homelessness were Beating the Odds. In 2019, Inclusive Economy Lab again partnered with CPS to recruit principals for interviews, via email and phone outreach. Researchers and partners led 30-minute phone interviews with principals and relevant staff, such as homelessness liaisons, at 21 of these 30 schools with the goal of collecting a repertoire of best practices often employed to support this population. The following seven best practices emerged from a synthesis of notes taken by a team of two interviewer-researchers.

1. Destigmatize STLS status
2. “Know kids’ stories”: foster relationships with students
3. Closely and consistently monitor students: utilize school data
4. “Sweat the small stuff”: meet basic needs
5. Connect students to paid internship opportunities; connect parents to employment skill-building opportunities
6. Make the school a “lighthouse to the community”: partner with outside organizations
7. Identify the right staff person to be the school’s STLS liaison

These strategies were compared against national best practices and shared with partners at the District.

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