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john w. gardner center for youth and their communities

research summary
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THE EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS OF HOMELESS & HIGHLY MOBILE STUDENTS IN SFUSD

In San Francisco, where both housing costs and income inequality continue to grow, the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) is focused on supporting homeless children and families. SFUSD partnered with Stanford University's Graduate School of Education and the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities to conduct research aimed at helping SFUSD better track, understand, and support their homeless and highly mobile (HHM) student population. This research-practice partnership received funding support from the Stanford/SFUSD Partnership Incentive Fund to further advance understanding of the student assets that promote resilient adaptation and educational success of HHM students. We examined how HHM students' social and emotional learning skills—self-management, growth mindset, self-efficacy, and social awareness—may support their academic achievement. We put forth three research questions:

1) What is the size and distribution of HHM students in SFUSD?
2) How heterogeneous is this student population?
3) What are the implications of being in this population for student outcomes? What student assets promote resilience and positive outcomes for HHM students?

Research Design

We analyzed SFUSD administrative data for school years 2013-14, 2014-15, and 2015-16. We used descriptive statistics to examine HHM students' demographics and educational outcomes, and multi-level regressions to test the contribution of social-emotional learning skills to students' achievement on state-administered standardized tests in Math and English language arts (ELA). As appropriate, we compared HHM students to the population of students eligible for free-price lunch.

Key Findings[1]

Describing the Homeless and Highly Mobile Student Population

- About 2,500 SFUSD students face homelessness or unstable housing each year, about 4% of the district student population.[2]

- The majority of SFUSD HHM students (60%) share the housing of other persons (i.e. "temporarily doubled up"), followed by those living in temporary shelters (28%) or hotels/motels (11%), and a small percentage (1%) who are temporarily unsheltered.

- Concentration of HHM students varies from school to school, with 10% of the schools accounting for 30% of the district's HHM population.

- Hispanic and Black students are overrepresented in the HHM population, at about double their rate in the overall district student population. Asian/Pacific Islander and White students are underrepresented.

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[1] All analyses use SFUSD administrative data for 2015-16 unless otherwise noted.
[2] Only student flagged as HHM in the district's data system were counted and considered HHM in the study. The real number of students experiencing unstable ho using could be considerably higher.

- Most HHM students experience housing instability for multiple years, with the majority of these students being identified as HHM for three consecutive years.

Educational Experiences and Outcomes

- HHM students are about six times more likely to change SFUSD schools at least once during the school year compared to free lunch students (12% versus 2%).

- HHM students are more than twice as likely to be chronically absent (at or below 90% attendance rate) compared to free lunch students (25% versus 11%).

- HHM students are 2.5 times more likely to be suspended than free lunch students (4.4% versus 1.7%)

- HHM students are more likely to experience lower GPA, standardized test scores, A-G completion, and high school graduation rates, compared to free lunch students.

- Multi-level regression analyses indicate that HHM status is associated with lower ELA and math scores, even when controlling for prior achievement.

Resilience among HHM Students

- Despite lower achievement on average, some HHM students attend school at high rates and show high academic achievement.

- Three-quarters of HHM students have an attendance rate of 90% or above, and the majority (55%) attend school at least 95% of the time.

- The majority of HHM students (52%) have a GPA of 2.5 or higher, and about one-third (32%) have a GPA of 3.0 or higher.

- Social and emotional learning skills relate to greater academic success for HHM students, even when controlling for student demographics, attendance, and prior achievement.

Implications

This research can help inform SFUSD's district and school-level strategies for supporting HHM students. Findings point to the high concentration of HHM students in certain schools, grades, and ethnic groups, as well as variation in the types of housing arrangements and duration of HHM status. Close examination of HHM students' social-emotional learning skills highlight the importance of self-management and growth mindset as protective factors for SFUSD HHM students, and suggest the benefit of targeting these skills to promote positive school outcomes for this vulnerable population. Another recent Stanford/SFUSD research project sheds some light on site-level issues related to coordination of services. In a survey of 58 SFUSD schools social workers, most agreed that SFUSD has policies in place to work with HHM students yet only about one-third agreed that their school has policies in place to identify HHM students.[3] Future investigation into strategies that school site staff use to identify and engage HHM students, coordinate with partner organizations, and collaborate with district staff, could foster learning and continuous improvement of SFUSD's efforts to support educational success for all students.

Research-Practice Partnership Team Members
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[3] Carlisle, M. (2017) "Implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act by SFUSD Social Workers."